

## You Wear My Heart on Your Sleeve

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# You Wear My Heart on Your Sleeve

by [StarlessMistake](#)

## Summary

Darklina!Soulmate AU

Everyone is born with a timer that counts down to when they will first touch their soulmate.

Two lonely souls have very different journeys on the way to meeting the other half of their heart.

## Notes

I am obsessed with Soulmate AUs, and I've yet to read this particular take on the trope for Darklina. So I figured I'd have to write it myself.

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

# Fate

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

A boy called Aleksander sat at the entrance to a cave, waiting for his mother to return. They had not lived in the cave for long; his mother insisted that it was not safe for them to stay in any one place for too long.

Aleksander hated the cave.

No light reached into the cave. Instead, shadows seemed to creep towards Aleksander from every crack in the jagged stone walls, and no matter how hard he tried to push them back they always seemed to follow him.

The shadows would obey his mother if she were to ever send them away, but she liked the dark. So he was given no respite from his fear whenever night fell.

However, at this moment there was something other than fear on Aleksander's mind.

His mother had been gone for two days – a journey to a nearby village to barter for food and other supplies - so Aleksander had taken the opportunity to sneak to the entrance of the cave and bask in the early autumn sunshine.

He knew he was meant to stay hidden at the back of the cave, but he could not help it. There was something about the sunlight that called to him.

He lay there, content in the warm glow of the afternoon, for several hours. Birdsong drifted his way from the nearby trees, and he could feel the crisp texture of recently fallen leaves beneath his fingers on the ground.

As he listened to the world around him, he found his thoughts drifting to the leather cuff that was strapped tightly around his right forearm.

More accurately, his thoughts drifted to the numbers shifting on his skin that he knew lay underneath the cuff.

Aleksander wanted to see the numbers.

The buckles were stiff from infrequent movement, and he struggled to unbuckle them using only his left hand. He brought the metal up to his teeth trying to get better leverage; the clasps tasted bitter against his tongue, but eventually they came free.

The cuff fell to the forest floor with a thud.

The revealed skin was pale from how little it was touched by the sun, but he paid it no mind, caring only for the inky blank numbers that stretched from the edge of his wrist to the crook of his elbow.

533:160:01:26:37...

533:160:01:26:36...

533:160:01:26:35...

His finger traced the numbers reverently. The touch sent tiny sparks tingling up his arm.

Their purpose was a mystery to him.

Lost in thought, Aleksander missed the rustling of leaves and snap of a twig that may have warned him of what approached. Instead, he was caught completely unaware as his small world was suddenly plunged into pitch black.

Scrambling to his feet, heart pounding, Aleksander found himself staring up into the furious eyes of his mother.

Long fingers seized his small wrist digging painfully into the exposed skin.

“How many times do I have to tell you, boy,” she spat. “The binding stays on.”

“I know. I’m sorry,” he mumbled, eyes downcast as she glared at him. “I only wanted to see the numbers. They have to mean something.”

Angrily she released his wrist, causing Aleksander to stumble back a few paces before he managed to right himself.

“The only thing that you need to know is that they mark you as different. If an Otkazat’sya were to see that mark they would not hesitate to string you up from the nearest tree.”

He kept his eyes down as he absent-mindedly rubbed small circles over the finger shaped bruises that were already beginning to form.

“The binding stays on.”

Aleksander scrambled to grab the discarded cuff off the floor and hastily strapped it once again around his forearm. His hands shook as he tightened the buckles that kept it secure.

“Yes mother.”

---

In another time and another place, a girl sat in a meadow softly tracing the black numbers that marked her arm.

18:226:07:13:56...

18:226:07:13:55...

18:226:07:13:54...

“Eighteen years, two hundred and twenty-six days, seven hours, thirteen minutes and fifty-three seconds,” Alina whispered to herself as she watched the numbers change over her skin.

Alerted by the sound of her whispering, her companion turned towards her and rolled his eyes.

“You spend too much time staring at those numbers,” he teased.

Alina glanced over at her best friend lying on the grass. A disgruntled expression crossed her face.

“Just because you don’t care about when you’ll meet your soulmate, Mal, doesn’t mean I can’t think about them,” she said as she turned her eyes back towards the elegant script that stretched across the inside of her right forearm.

“I do care about my soulmate Alina. But I’m not going to sit around waiting for her to appear,” he said with a huff. “Besides, I’ll be twenty-five when I meet her, going by what my numbers say, and you’ll be thirty when you meet yours. That’s a long time to be waiting for someone to show up.”

Alina ignored the jab and instead cast her thoughts back into her daydream.

She wondered what they would be like.

What colour their hair would be? Would they be taller than her? What their smile would look like?

But mostly she thought about what it would feel like when they first touched - when the numbers on her arm would finally reach zero.

She wondered if somewhere out there, they were thinking of her too.

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Several years passed for the boy who was once known only as Aleksander.

*Abram, Grigor, Luka, Viktor...* He recited in his head, trying to keep track of all the names he had been given - a new name for each time he and his mother fled from whatever crumbling shack they called home.

Eryk was his latest name, given to him only a few days ago when he and his mother arrived at the outskirts of a small village near the Fjerdan border. However, no matter what others called him, in his heart he would always be Aleksander.

Half-melted snow squelched beneath his feet as he made his way towards the quiet settlement. His mother had tasked him with purchasing some necessary supplies from the village market, and he had set out early to avoid the late morning crowds.

Eventually, he reached the edge of the village. Keeping his head low to avoid unwanted attention, he wound his way towards the market that was located in the centre of town.

The streets were blessedly quiet so early in the morning, so Aleksander was quickly able to acquire the needed items. He spoke to as few people as possible, only providing the basic courtesy necessary to complete each transaction.

After carefully stowing his purchases, he turned to begin the long walk back to the abandoned hut they currently called home. However, before he could leave, he was distracted by the sound of a child shouting.

“It’s not fair!” A boy half Aleksander’s age wailed to his mother, who seemed to be trying desperately to calm him down. “Why do I have to wait ten years to meet my soulmate. That’s too long!”

“Hush now Dima,” the woman soothed, gently taking hold of the child’s right sleeve to reveal the numbers underneath. “Ten years is not so long a time to wait. I had to wait almost twenty-eight years to meet your papa.

“And a soulmate is worth waiting for. You’ll meet them when your numbers say you’ll meet them.”

Aleksander froze mid-step as he tried to contemplate what he had just overheard.

*Soulmate.*

The word consumed his mind, filling all the space in his head until he could think of nothing else.

He had a *soulmate*.

Somewhere out there, there was someone who would love him. Someone who he would not have to hide or run from. Someone who would help him keep the darkness at bay when his fear was too much.

His heart started beating twice as fast as it had before, and without conscious thought his feet began to carry him out of the village.

It did not take long before he was racing through the trees, desperate to get to somewhere secluded where he could look at his own numbers. He needed to know when he would meet his soulmate.

In his distracted state, he stumbled several times as he ran, his feet slipping on grey slush that covered the forest floor. However, he could not find himself to care. His heart felt lighter than it had ever felt before.

Eventually, he began to slow as he felt that he had travelled far enough to be alone. His lungs burned from the exertion of running so far. Searching for somewhere to stop, his eyes came across a fallen tree – its roots large enough to obscure him from anyone who might be nearby.

Ungracefully, he slumped down in his chosen spot. Hands shaking slightly, from exhaustion or anticipation he could not say, he carefully reached for the cuff that concealed the mark he so desperately wanted to see.

He could not help but hold his breath as the numbers were revealed. With his left hand he traced the digits backwards from his elbow to his wrist, whispering to himself as he deciphered their meaning.

*Eight seconds...*

*Thirty-six minutes...*

*Ten hours...*

*Twenty-two days...*

*And... And....*

Suddenly it was as if the whole world was pushing down on his chest. He couldn't breathe, couldn't think, as he read the final number.

*Five-hundred and twenty-nine years.*

The seed of hope that had begun to grow in his heart withered as he realised what those last three digits meant.

Aleksander considered himself to be patient, but the prospect of waiting lifetimes to meet the other half of his soul was too much to comprehend.

Tears fell unbidden, blurring the accursed numbers that a moment ago he had been so excited to read.

Curling up in the base of the tree, Aleksander wept.

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"Get your head out of the clouds, girl!"

The reprimand shocked Alina out of the pleasant daydream she had been lost in. The kind grey eyes she had imagined faded from her mind as she attempted to switch her focus to the stern housekeeper sitting in front of her.

Unconsciously, her left hand grasped at her right arm, her thumb beginning to draw small circles over the numbers imprinted there.

Ana Kuya twitched an eyebrow, noticing Alina's reaction.

"You should be working on your sketching, not dreaming about soulmates. Those numbers won't be of any help when the first army recruiters come knocking." Ana Kuya held Alina's gaze sharply as she spoke.

"You cannot base your whole life on something as unreliable as a soulmate."

“What do you mean, unreliable?” Alina asked nervously. “I thought soulmates are determined by fate.”

“Fate is a fickle thing, girl. Those numbers can change if you or they stray from fate’s allotted path,” the woman reprimanded. “Or they could fade away altogether if your soulmate meets an untimely demise.”

Alina’s heart seized as she imagined her numbers disappearing. She shut her eyes tightly and shook her head as if that would make the horrid image leave her alone.

“Enough of that, girl. Get back to your drawing.” Ana Kuya chastised. “I want that sketch finished before sundown.”

Letting out a shaky breath, Alina opened her eyes and stared at the half-finished map in front of her.

The angry, black scar that showed the fold sat in its centre. Its edges were jagged, obviously in need of blending. Alina had always thought that this abomination was her greatest fear, but now... now she thinks she has found something she is even more scared of.

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“Darkling. You’re surrounded.”

The sound of bowstrings pulling taught echoed across the steps of the ruined chapel. Aleksander paid them no mind. What were arrows against the power he now knew how to wield?

A cold fury simmered just underneath his skin.

For one hundred years Aleksander had played his part. Winning the war for the King was meant to guarantee safety for his people. Instead, the King had betrayed him, putting a bounty on his head and hunting Grisha even more fiercely than before.

He clenched his jaw and stared into the eyes of the commander. His thoughts were a whirlwind.

*I will make this world safe for Grisha.*

“Hold your arms wide.”

Aleksander complied. The weight of the leather cuff he still wore was heavy as he stretched his arms out.

He thought of his soulmate.

*I will make this world safe for you.*

“If he moves his arms, shoot him.”



The words meant nothing to him. Soon enough he would show them who held all the power here.

*I will make it so you will never be hunted for who you are.*

Two soldiers approached him cautiously, shackles in hand. Before they could reach him, Aleksander cast his gaze down and began to chant.

Darkness swelled around him, a power he had never felt before filling his veins. He sensed the Merzost take hold as the soldiers around him gasped in unison and clawed desperately at their throats.

*I will make an army strong enough to protect you.*

The power flooding his veins grew stronger. It was like fire burning underneath his skin. He struggled to contain it, but it was too much.

*I promise, my love.*

The darkness burst forth. It was everywhere; he could not control it.

Aleksander screamed.

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Alina came to a stop as she reached the centre of the First Army camp. All around her she could hear the sounds of orders being shouted and people laughing. Her feet ached from the long walk from where the cart had dropped her Cartography unit off.

She sighed, unsure of what to do with herself now she had finally arrived.

“Alina!” A voice yelled cheerfully from behind her.

The corners of her mouth twitched upwards as she turned to face the man who had called out to her.

“It’s great to see you, Mal.”

The man in question half-jogged towards her, smiling widely. He slung one arm around her shoulders and pulled her into a lopsided hug. A burst of fondness warmed Alina as she hugged him back.

“Come on, our tents are this way,” he said, as he began to guide them both towards a different section of the camp. “They’ve moved us to make more room for the Second Army.”

As they walked, they passed a group of Etherealki who were practising their summoning.

Alina watched as Mal’s eyes slid appreciatively over a beautiful looking Squaller. To her surprise the Squaller noticed and held Mal’s stare. A moment passed, before the woman winked and strode away decisively.

Alina pinched Mal's hand, one eyebrow raised judgementally.

"What was that for?" He swatted her hand away.

"You know exactly what that was for," Alina reprimanded. "Can't you go one night without sneaking off for a tumble?"

Mal laughed. "Don't worry, I'm not going to run off tonight. We've got a lot of catching up to do."

Alina smiled. She knew she could count on Mal to be her friend even when the rest of the world seemed against her.

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Aleksander clenched his fists but resisted the urge to slam them angrily onto his desk as he read the latest casualty reports.

In the North, Six Grisha had been captured by Druskelle, most likely already on boats heading to Fjerda for execution.

To the South, the situation was even more dire. Shu-Han had managed to destroy a Ravkan military camp.

The loss of the base itself was a strategic headache that he knew needed to be dealt with. But it was the names of the twenty-three Grisha who had lost their lives defending the camp that he was more concerned with.

Over four-hundred years had passed since he had created the Fold. Four-hundred years of battle, sacrifice and loss, and yet it was not enough.

It was true that the Little Palace was a safe haven for Grisha, but its protection could only help his people that were born in Ravka, and even that hard earned sanctuary balanced on the knife edge of the King's fancy.

Grisha were valued soldiers, but they would only continue to be valued as long as there was a war to fight. Aleksander had hoped that he would have been able to do more by this point. He wanted his people to have the luxury to choose what they wanted to do in life. But that was not yet a possibility.

The weight of his years felt as heavy as the black cuff strapped securely to his right arm. The smooth leather was kept hidden from view by the sleeves of his kefta, but even without seeing it he felt its existence constantly.

Tomorrow, he thought with a twinge of cynicism, would mark ten years until his timer reached zero.

Ten years was the blink of an eye in comparison to his long existence. He had made plans upon plans to ensure his soulmate's safety, but there were so many unknowns that he could not control.

He did not even know if his soulmate had been born yet. With deep conviction he knew that they would be a powerful Grisha, so surely his testers would find them as a child and bring them safely to the Little Palace.

And yet he could not help but worry. What if they were not born in Ravka, but instead in Fjerda or Shu-Han, or even farther afield in Kerch or Novyi Zem? There was no conceivable way he could search the entire continent, but he did not want to leave something of such importance up to fate.

Fate after all had never been on his side.

Aleksander let out a long sigh and wrenched his thoughts back to more pressing matters. The new skiff would be launching tomorrow, and he could not afford any complications on its maiden voyage.

He could dwell on dreams another time. For now, there was work to be done.

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“For the supply run across the fold...”

Later, when Alina would look back on this moment, she would be ashamed to admit that she was hardly paying attention to the grizzled sergeant as he named those unlucky few that would be forced to travel across the fold.

Mal had told her it would be fine, and she believed him wholeheartedly. Neither of them would be assigned to the skiff.

So instead of listening to the shouted list of names, Alina was thinking about the numbers hidden beneath her right sleeve. In just a few hours the first digits would tick over to zero, signalling that she would have less than ten years of waiting before she met her soulmate.

However, before her thoughts could wander too far from the crowded tent she was stood in, she was plunged back into the present moment by the next words from the sergeant’s mouth.

“Tracker Malyen Oretsev!”

It was as if her whole body was suddenly submerged in ice. She grabbed Mal’s arm, staring desperately at him, eyes wide.

“They can’t send you across, Mal! You’re meant to be in our unit,” she whispered, unable to keep the panic out of her voice.

“It has to be a mistake,” he responded quickly. “I’ll check with the sergeant after, get it all sorted out.”

“But what if it’s not a mistake.” The sound: *thump, thump, thump*, of her heart rose above the noise of the tent. She imagined Mal on that skiff, surrounded entirely by darkness, Volcras swarming overhead. In a flash she saw Mal’s broken body being carried away forever to be lost in the dark.

She could not let that happen.

She would not let that happen.

In hindsight, burning the maps may not have been her finest moment, but Alina was desperate. She had so little time before the skiff left and she thought that if she volunteered to travel West to replace them, she and Mal would at least face the fold together.

What Alina did not anticipate was the sergeant ordering her whole unit onto the skiff.

Mal was furious as he saw the group of cartographers warily stepped aboard. She had known he would be, but even so she refused to back down.

The choice had been her own, and now all she had was the hope that she had not doomed Alexie and the others alongside her.

“Right, listen to me, cartographers,” a voice from the front of the skiff shouted. “Until we reach the Western dry docks you are to remain at your station.”

Alina assumed her position, just as the skiff jolted and started its slow approach towards the fold. She hurriedly grabbed the railing to keep herself steady, clutching her satchel tightly as the wind summoned by the Squallers on board picked up.

The fold loomed over them. Inky black tendrils seemed to slither around its edge, constantly twisting and snaking as if trying to ensnare anything that approached.

There was a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach as the skiff picked up speed towards it. That this might be the last time she ever stood in the light of the sun.

She was so focused on the writhing shadows before her that she failed to notice the gust of wind that caught her scarf and pulled it free from around her neck. Frantically she whipped around to try and catch it, but it slipped through her fingers.

It drifted haphazardly towards the dry dock, before settling in the dull sands a few feet from the landing platform.

The landing platform where a man dressed entirely in black was currently standing.

Alina could not describe what she felt in that moment staring at the figure on the dry dock. It was as if her heart stopped beating for a moment before restarting, beating to a different rhythm than before. There was a tug on her chest. And a voice, unknown and yet oh so familiar, seemed to whisper in her ear.

*Come back to me... please...*

Time seemed to slow, that single moment stretching into an age. And then just as suddenly as that strange feeling had overcome her, it vanished as the world was swallowed entirely by darkness.

They had entered the fold.

Alina squinted, eyes darting wildly as she tried to make out anything of her surroundings. The blue light at the mast did not emit enough light to see more than a few feet in any direction. But there was no way she could miss the screams of the Volcra that were already circling above.

A feeling of dread crept up her spine as she stood frozen in place, unable to move as the noise of the fold roared around her.

She was so caught up in her fear that she did not initially notice the tingling that began on her right arm. The tingling increased in intensity, before the pain crescendoed into a searing pain.

It was as if her entire forearm was on fire.

The fear that Alina had struggled to suppress surged into a full-blown panic.

Something was happening to her mark.

Tears welled furiously in her eyes, and she struggled to keep her breathing under control.

*Saints help me.*

She was going to die.

There were only a few reasons why a mark would alter. The only one she could think of in the moment was a premature death.

The skiff was doomed, as well as her and all the people on it.

Just as that thought came upon her, there was a shout from just beneath the mast. She watched in horror as the blue lantern flickered and then blinked out.

For a second, the world was still as everyone tried to comprehend what had just happened.

Her horror only grew as she watched a soldier strike a match, his hands shaking in the orange glow of the flame. One of the Grisha shouted for him to put the fire out, but it was too late.

The Volcra descended.

After that there was no time to think. Alina scrambled on the deck as fire and gunshots erupted around her.

All around her men and women were being ripped into the sky by the terrifying creatures.

Suddenly the chaos seemed to part in front of her. Alina saw Mal being lifted into the air, a Volcra's claws wrapped around his throat. Without thinking, She grabbed for a rifle that lay discarded in front of her and fired at the Volcra.

Mal fell with a thud to the deck and she rushed over to him. His eyes were blessedly open when she reached him, and Alina grabbed for his hand, desperate to offer any reassurance she could.

She tried to say something to him. But before the words could leave her mouth, she felt herself being lifted into the sky.

There was a sickening crack as her collarbone was crushed by the Volcra's claws that had her in its grip. Pain erupted from her shoulder.

She struggled to keep hold of Mal's hand as she was pulled higher and higher.

All of a sudden, she felt power rushing from somewhere deep within her. It surged just beneath her skin, desperate to be released. Alina struggled to contain it, to push it down, but she was not strong enough.

The world exploded in light.

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There was a chill in the air as Aleksander made his way towards the dock. Soldiers rushed about around him, the last preparations for the skiff's departure almost complete. Being surrounded by so many Otkazat'sya grated on his nerves, but he felt a duty to his Grisha on-board to see them off.

He watched as the skiff pulled away from the dock. His vantage point gave him an excellent view of the vessel's slow approach to the looming mass of shadows that made up the edge of the fold.

The skiff was more than halfway towards the fold when a fluttering caught Aleksander's eye. What appeared to be a blue and gold scarf had been caught in the strong winds blown by his Squallers and was now drifting in his direction.

Having deemed the distraction unimportant, he returned his gaze once again to the skiff that was now only a few dozen feet from the fold.

The world seemed to slow.

There was something on his chest. It wrapped tight around his heart, constricting it for a moment before wrenching him forward.

The pull he felt was so strong he almost stumbled.

He straightened his spine, thoughts whirling at a mile a minute to try and make sense of what he was feeling.

He considered and then disregarded the idea that this was the work of a Heartrender. In his long life he had been on the receiving end of their power many times and what he was feeling felt nothing like the work of a Corporalki.

The tether that was wrapped around his heart tightened once again, and he realised exactly what direction it seemed to be pulling him.

It was pulling him towards the skiff.

There was something important on that ship, although he did not know what it could be. His subconscious called out for the skiff to return, but it was no use. The skiff had reached the border of the fold and in only a few seconds it was swallowed by writhing shadows.

He stood frozen on the dock, still staring at the point where the skiff had disappeared. A moment passed, then another, and Aleksander inhaled a shaking breath, still trying to make sense of what just happened.

He had just decided to turn around and return to his tent when he felt it.

There was a prickling in his right arm, directly where he knew his mark to be. The sensation intensified rapidly until it was a searing pain directly on his mark.

*No. No. NO!*

Suddenly the missing pieces slotted together with horrifying clarity.

His soulmate was on that skiff.

They were inside the fold, unguarded against the numerous Volcra that would not hesitate to tear them to pieces.

Suddenly, he realised that he *needed* to see his mark. If the numbers had really faded then there would be no other choice than to fight his way through the fold and find the skiff. The thought of spending an eternity with no one was too terrifying to contemplate.

Ferociously, he tore at his cuff. The leather straps snapping as he wrenched it free.

It fell to the ground with a thud.

Aleksander stared at his arm, desperately trying to make sense at what he was looking at.

Before today, his mark had recorded a wait of ten years before he would meet his soulmate. But now the mark showed something entirely different.

000:000:00:57:12

A breath he had not realised he had been holding released as he saw that his arm was not blank.

*Less than an hour.*

After over five-hundred years of waiting his number would reach zero in less than an hour.

He wrenched his gaze back to the fold, considering whether he should still rush in. The numbers on his arm told him that his soulmate would survive, and the risk that he would endanger them further by entering was too great.

As much as he hated it, his best option was to do nothing.

Decision made, he turned swiftly and strode in the direction of his tent.

As he marched, he pulled the sleeve of his kefta to cover his mark. With his mark uncovered, he felt exposed in a way he had not experienced for centuries.

Fortunately, nobody was unwise enough to bother him on his short journey. His shoulders drooped fractionally once he was finally alone in his tent.

He moved towards his desk and stared at the numerous papers and missives that lay strewn across it. Try as he might, he could not focus on any of the words before him.

The next hour, he knew, would not be a productive one.

Frustrated, Aleksander began to pace.

Now that the moment he had been waiting for was so close, he found his normally limitless patience wearing thin.

There was nothing he could do but wait.

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Cold, hard wood pressing into her back.

The sound of heavy footsteps all around.

The smell of blood and smoke.

A searing pain in her shoulder.

Alina's eyes were heavy as she struggled to open them. The light of the sun burned bright above her, and she quickly screwed her eyes shut against the pain that bloomed in the back of her skull.

There was shouting coming from somewhere, but the noises felt far away. Her brain struggled to try and decipher any of what she was hearing.

Suddenly a voice seemed to cut through the haze of her mind.

"Healer!"

The sound of footprints approaching. Then there were hands on her.

Her eyes shot open as the pain in her shoulder exploded.

"Hold! Your collarbone is fractured."

A woman in red knelt over her. Alina stared as she moved her hands in an obviously well-practised motion and then... Crack!



Alina jerked as she felt bones knit back together in an instant. The intense pain that had been blurring her thoughts receded to a dull throb.

As her mind began to clear, the events of the last hour began to return to her in flashes.

*The fold looming over her.*

*A tug on her chest.*

*Darkness.*

*Fire and screams.*

*Mal, pulled into the sky by a Volcra's claws.*

*A bright light.*

"Mal! The tracker. Where is he?"

"First Army goes to medical."

That didn't make sense – she was First Army. Shouldn't she be taken there too.

Before Alina could formulate a response, a figure dressed in a blue kefta stepped into her field of view.

"Bring her to the general's tent."

The feeling of ice washed over her, and Alina's body went very still.

*The general* could only refer to one man, and he was not someone that she ever thought she would have a reason to meet.

The Healer protested as Alina was hauled to her feet by two men in charcoal grey uniforms. Alina struggled to gain a footing as they began a swift march off the dry docks.

The soldier to her right tightened the grip on her arm as she stumbled. Suddenly another flash of memory came to her.

*A searing pain underneath her mark.*

A gasp left her lips. With wide eyes she stared down at the sleeve covering her right forearm, desperately wishing she could pull her sleeve aside to know for sure whether her mark had really disappeared. But the unyielding grip of the two Oprichniki meant she was unable to move her hands.

Distracted as she was, she did not notice that they had reached the imposing black tent that belonged to the general of the Second Army. The guards pulled the flaps aside before pushing her forcefully into the centre of the tent.

Alina fought to keep her head held high even as she stumbled inside. The light in the tent was much dimmer than outside, so it took her eyes several moments to adjust to her surroundings.

Dozens of Grisha in red, blue, and purple keftas stood around the perimeter of the tent, but Alina paid them no mind. Her attention was instead focused solely on the towering figure in front of her.

The man was currently facing away from her, leaning over a large wooden desk. He was dressed entirely in black – leaving no doubt to his identity. Even so, his presence alone was enough to tell Alina exactly who he was.

General Kirigan – leader of the Second Army.

Slowly, he turned to face her. His eyes raked over her, starting at her feet.

Alina held her gaze steady as he inspected her. He lingered for a moment on her right arm, a trace of something unreadable in his expression before he finally looked her in the eye.

For the second time that day, time seemed to slow.

It felt like her heart might leap right out of her throat with how hard it was suddenly beating.

His eyes were so dark they almost looked black. Alina felt as if they were staring directly into her soul as she stood unmoving.

A moment passed, marked only by the *thump, thump, thump* of her heartbeat.

Then he spoke.

“Who are you?”

His words were a question, but his tone told her that this was undeniably an order.

“Alina Starkov, Assistant Cartographer, Royal Corps of Surveyors.”

She fought to keep her voice steady. Whatever force was affecting her, she would not appear weak in front of this man.

His lips twitched upwards fractionally at her response.

“Tell me, Alina Starkov...”

There was something almost revenant in the way that he spoke her name. It confused her.

“What happened in the fold?”

*Darkness.*

*Pain.*

*Light.*

“We were attacked, sir.” The pieces were all jumbled together as she tried to make sense of them. “I don’t know what happened next.”

An intense expression crossed his face as he appeared to search for a lie in what she had said. Then for the first time since she had entered, he turned to address the rest of the tent.

“So who *did* see what happened?” Nobody responded. A few Grisha shifted nervously. “Zoya? You manned the main sail.”

The woman who had ordered Alina be taken to the general began to speak.

“We were attacked barely two markers in. Someone lit a lantern.”

“And?”

“The Volcra went after the riflemen and our Inferni first. And then there was a searing light.”

“It was her!” Shouted someone from the crowd.

Seemingly satisfied, the general focused his attention on Alina once again.

“Is it true? Can you summon light?”

Alina shook her head cautiously. It couldn’t be true - nobody could summon light.

His expression was contemplative as he considered his next question.

“Where did you grow up?”

“Keramzin,” Alina answered honestly.

“And when were you tested?”

The question threw her. A lie began to form on her tongue, but the general, noticing her hesitation, interrupted before she could speak.

“No matter. Let us make certain, now.”

He took a step towards her. A familiar tug pulled at her chest.

The shadows darkened as he approached. The others fading away into nothingness until all Alina could see was him.

“Lift up your sleeve.”

His voice was soft, but firm. And she found herself complying unthinkingly.

Her hand grabbed at her right sleeve, pulling it up to reveal her forearm.

His eyes flicked immediately down to the exposed skin before refocusing on her once again. It should not have been possible, but his stare was now even more intense. And there was

something else, a new expression that she struggled to identify.

It almost looked like... relief.

All of a sudden, another memory returned to her. With a gasp, Alina tore her eyes away from the general to stare down at where she knew her mark once was, terrified that she would see it gone.

Her mark had not disappeared. Instead, it showed the impossible.

00:000:00:00:03

*Three...*

Her breathing picked up as she struggled to make sense of what she was seeing.

*Two...*

The general was close, now. He stood only a few inches away, his eyes never leaving her face.

*One...*

Her heart was beating so fast it was painful.

*Zero.*

A hand gently took hold of her arm.

The moment their skin touched, A feeling unlike anything she had ever felt washed over her.

Power coursed through her veins, spreading from her arm until her whole body was warm – as if she had been lying under the midsummer sun.

It should have frightened her, but instead she felt calm.

She looked up into her soulmate's eyes. He was still staring at her, looking at her as if she were the most precious thing in the whole world.

Alina wished he would never stop looking at her like that.

The power within her surged once more.

She was tired of fighting it. She did not want to hide anymore, not when she might have finally found the other half of her heart.

She let the power out.

A golden light began to emanate from her body. It pulsed outwards, forming a dome that enveloped the two of them.

Distantly, Alina heard gasps, as every shadow in the tent was banished, replaced by the light that she had created. She ignored them. Nothing mattered to her except the man standing in front of her.

Never once letting go, his hand slowly began to glide down her arm until he was holding her hand in his. Ever so carefully, he raised her hand to his lips and pressed a soft kiss to her knuckles.

His eyes shone almost as brightly as Alina herself.

When he spoke, his voice was so soft she could barely hear him. His words were meant only for her.

“I have been waiting a long time for you, Alina.”

## Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading! This work started as a oneshot, but after all of the amazing feedback I've decided to expand this into a multi-chapter fic.

Comments are very much appreciated :)

# Journey

## Chapter Notes

Hi guys! I'm back!

I was completely blown away by the comments and kudos I got on this story. Your response to the first chapter was so amazing it motivated me to expand upon this universe further. I've already plotted out a third chapter, and I'll see how it goes after that.

I love you all x

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Everybody out!”

The general released her hand as he barked the order to the others watching. The golden dome that had been surrounding the two of them dissipated, returning the tent to its previous dim light.

The sounds of chatter and footsteps picked up and then faded as the tent quickly emptied. The man in front of her let out a small breath once they were finally alone.

Without the pressure of dozens of Grisha staring at her, Alina finally took the time to admire her soulmate.

He was tall, towering over her by nearly a foot. His grey eyes were so dark they almost looked black. And his hair was neatly trimmed. It looked soft, and she wondered how it would feel to run her hands through it.

Shaking off that thought, Alina mustered her courage and slowly reached for the elegant black sleeve that covered his right arm. Her fingers hesitated before they could touch the fabric.

“May I?” she asked gently.

He stared at her silently for a moment, conflict swirling in his eyes. Just as she was about to retreat, an apology forming on the tip of her tongue, he inclined his head in a nod.

The fabric was velvety under her fingertips, the coat obviously cost more than anything Alina had ever touched in her life. Slowly she pulled back the sleeve, exposing the numbers marked on his skin.

000:000:00:00:00.

She breathed a sigh of relief. There had been no doubt in her mind that this man was her soulmate, but seeing his numbers lifted a tiny weight from her heart. Unconsciously, her fingers traced the mark. The touch sent tiny sparks of electricity up her hand, and that same feeling of surety washed over her.

She hesitated over the years' digits imprinted on his arm. It was common knowledge that some Grisha lived unusually long lives, but the three zeroes nearest to his wrist told her that he had been waiting for her for over a century. She tried to imagine how it would feel to have to wait so long; it must have been unbearably lonely.

Before he could react, she wrapped her arms around him tightly, pulling him into a firm embrace. His body stiffened for several seconds, before he hesitantly brought his hands to rest against the small of her back.

*Thump. Thump. Thump.* The sound of his heartbeat soothed her, as she rested her cheek on his chest. They stayed that way for several minutes.

Eventually, Alina sighed and craned her neck upwards so she could see her soulmate's face.

"What happens now?" she asked quietly.

A sigh left his lips as he met her gaze.

"Now...I get you to the safety of the Little Palace."

The soft rumbling of his voice against her ear had a calming effect, even as his words made her nervous.

"Am I in danger?"

"Your demonstration in the fold was visible for miles. I'm afraid that our enemies will already be planning how to hunt you down." Dark eyes stared intensely at her. "Which is why we need to leave for Os Alta immediately."

Involuntarily, she flinched backwards slightly, struggling with the idea that there were people who wanted her dead. The motion pulled at her aching shoulder. A sharp pain bloomed outwards from her collarbone, and she failed to suppress a wince.

He noticed her reaction immediately, arms loosening around her back as he spoke.

"You're injured."

His voice was filled with concern. She tried to shrug off his worry, but she could tell that he would not be placated so easily.

Carefully, he guided her towards a plush sofa situated at the back of the tent. He made sure she was settled before turning and striding towards the tent opening. Alina watched as he spoke a few words with a stern-faced man in a red kefta.

The man disappeared from the entrance for a few moments, before returning, joined by the Healer that had treated her back on the dry docks. Alina held still as the Healer gave her a much more thorough inspection than she had managed previously. The general hovered a few feet away, watching intently as cuts and bruises faded from her skin.

Once the Healer was satisfied that Alina was sufficiently treated, she stood, inclined her head to the general in a show of deference and then began to head back to the entrance of the tent.

Her head now clear from the haze of pain that had been clouding some of her thoughts, Alina suddenly remembered something important.

“Mal! My friend Malyen Oretsev was injured in the fold. I need to see him!” Pleading eyes sought the general, as her breathing quickened.

He held her gaze as he questioned her.

“He’s important to you?”

“We grew up together. He’s the closest thing to family I have.”

For a moment, she was worried he might refuse, but then he spoke.

“There is very little I would not do for you if it would bring you happiness.” The sincerity in his voice shocked her. “We can go see him now, while the carriage is still being prepared.”

He offered her his hand, and she permitted him to pull her to her feet. Together they walked side by side out of the tent. The bright light of the mid-morning sun startled her a little after coming from the comforting dimness of the tent. As they weaved their way towards the medical tent, she was uncomfortably aware of the stares and whispers of First and Second Army soldiers that followed them the entire way.

The medical tent was in a state of disarray with so many having been injured in the crossing. The thick scent of blood was heavy in the air as Alina cast her eyes over the many wounded soldiers trying to locate her friend. Eventually, she found him, lying on a cot at the edge of one of the marquees.

“Mal!” She rushed over to him, taking in his appearance as she did so. His breathing was ragged, and his eyes were screwed shut in pain. One of his legs was wrapped tight in bandages that were stained heavily with blood.

He opened his eyes with a gasp when she reached him.

“Alina!” He choked. “What... happened? They said... The general’s tent... Light...?”

Before he could say any more, he suddenly turned away from her and began to cough violently. When he turned back to face her there was blood on his chin.

She turned to the general, who was standing a few paces away watching intently, meaning to beg for his help. Before she could speak, he had already gestured to the Healer that had followed them from his tent. The woman rushed forward and blessedly began to treat Mal.



Alina felt some of the tension release from her shoulders as Mal's breathing evened out and the wound on his leg closed. She grabbed his hand and squeezed it tightly in relief. His eyes were now clear from the fog of pain.

"I'm the Sun Summoner, Mal," she said. It was the first time she had acknowledged what she was. "I didn't know, before the fold, but when I saw you get hurt something came over me."

He looked like he was about to say something, but Alina knew she had to tell him the rest.

"But that's not all." She lowered her voice for her next words, not wanting any of the other soldiers nearby to hear. "General Kirigan... He's my soulmate."

Mal gaped at her. His mouth moved wordlessly for a few moments before he seemed to figure out what he wanted to say.

"You're sure?"

"Yes, Mal. I'm sure," she replied with a twinge of annoyance. "It's not exactly something you can fake."

The conviction in her words seemed to convince him and he let out a sigh.

"I'm sorry Alina. That was uncalled for." He lay his head back against the wood of his cot. "So much has happened today."

Behind her, hooves clattered, and she heard the sound of wheels scraping through mud. The carriage had arrived.

She squeezed Mal's hand.

"I have to go now. It's not safe for me here anymore."

He looked like he was ready to argue, but his better judgement won out. Instead, he offered her a small smile.

"Promise you'll write?"

"I promise, Mal. And maybe once everything has calmed down, you could come visit?" She was very aware that the general was a few paces away, even with her back to him. Hopefully, his words from earlier about her happiness still applied.

Sloppily, Mal pulled her into a hug. The position was awkward with him lying down, but she was grateful for it all the same.

"I'll miss you," he said. "Stay safe."

"You too." Giving one last squeeze, she pulled back from the hug. "I'll see you soon, Mal."

Reluctantly, she turned away from her friend. An ornate black carriage stood before her, pulled by six majestic looking horses. The carriage door was held open by the general, who

was watching her with a now familiar, intense expression on his face. Inhaling a shaky breath, she stepped towards him.

Before she could clamber up the steps and into the carriage, the general held a hand up to stop her. Swiftly, he removed his black kefta. Alina found herself unable to react as he wrapped it around her, securing the buttons with deft fingers. Wordlessly, he placed a hand on the small of her back and guided her inside the carriage.

He turned to address the stern man from before. A Heartrender, she guessed from the colours on his kefta.

“We’ll take the Southern trails – less likely there’ll be an ambush. We stop for nothing,” he ordered.

Not waiting for a response, he climbed inside, shutting the door behind him. He settled into the seat across from her. With a loud knock on the ceiling, the carriage jolted forward as they began the journey towards the capital.

The interior of the carriage was even more ornate than the outside. Velvet cushions covered every surface and sheer curtains hung elegantly next to each window. Absent-mindedly she pulled at the cuff of one of the sleeves of the general’s kefta, eyes downcast to avoid looking at the man sat across from her. There was mud caked under her fingernails. Her hands stilled, not wanting to dirty the expensive fabric.

*Saints... What am I doing here?*

Unbidden, laughter fell from her lips. A hiccup caught in her throat and suddenly she was crying, the day’s events finally catching up to her. Tears streamed down her face. They splashed silently onto her lap, darkening the black fabric even further.

“What...Alina?”

Sobs wracked her body. Distantly, she felt movement, before strong arms were pulling her against a warm body to her side.

“Shhh... You’re okay,” he murmured to her. Unable to stop the tears, she buried her face against his chest. He continued to whisper soft encouragements as he held her, one hand drawing small circles against her back.

Eventually, she managed to get her breathing under control. The tears slowed before stopping altogether, and she turned to look up at the man holding her.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“Don’t apologise. You’ve had to deal with a lot today,” he responded.

She was quiet for a moment, one question weighing heavy on her mind.

“I don’t even know your name,” she admitted softly.

A beat passed as he seemed to consider his response.

“My name is Aleksander.”

There was a weight to his words that she could not decipher.

“Aleksander...” The name tasted sweet on her tongue.

The corners of his lips twitched upwards in a smile.

“It has been a very long time since anybody has called me by my true name,” he said.

They sat in silence for several minutes, both content to share the other’s company. The soothing motion of his hand on her back calmed her and she soon found her eyes began to droop.

Embarrassed, she blinked several times, trying in vain to shake the haze of drowsiness that had come over her. Aleksander, noticing her reaction, pulled her in closer to his side.

“Sleep,” he said. “We have the rest of our lives to get to know each other. A few hours more won’t make a difference.”

Comforted by his words and presence, Alina succumbed to her tired eyes. The last thing she heard before sleep overcame her was an unfamiliar tune hummed by her soulmate.

---

Aleksander’s arm had gone numb at least an hour ago, but he paid it no mind. Any discomfort was a trivial sacrifice if it meant not disturbing the sleeping woman tucked up against his side.

For all the years waiting for his soulmate, he had never permitted himself to imagine what they might look like. Gazing down at her now, he was glad he had never entertained such thoughts – his imagination could not have compared to the real thing.

She was beautiful.

Even with a layer of grime and dust from the journey into the fold, she was radiant. And he knew she would only get more beautiful as she began to use her powers. His jaw clenched at the thought that she had suppressed her summoning for so long. Repressing herself in that way would have made her sick – he would not let that continue any longer.

The moment she had appeared in that tent, he had felt the broken pieces that had once been his heart begin to reform. Not into the shape it had been before – the innocent boy who had cried at shadows was buried too deep for that - but perhaps it would form into something better.

And then he had taken her arm, and his whole world had been reforged in light.

Vaguely, he had been aware of centuries of meticulous plotting falling in tatters at his feet. There would be time to pick up the pieces later, to rearrange them into a plan that would keep his soulmate safe and happy by his side. She was his equal, and he would carve her a place in this world that meant she never doubted that fact.

But all of that was for later. For now, he was content to simply bask in her presence.

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Alina awoke slowly.

Her thoughts came to her gradually as she brushed off the haze of sleep. She was pressed up against something comfortable, her cheek resting against soft fabric. And unlike her usual awakenings in the cartographers' tent, she was pleasantly warm.

Lazily, her eyes blinked open, and she found herself staring up at her soulmate, who was gazing at her with a fond expression.

"We've arrived," he said.

She noticed then that the carriage had stopped. The light was also much dimmer than when she had fallen asleep. She guessed it was already past dusk.

Once she had extracted herself from his embrace, he exited the carriage. He offered her his hand, and she gratefully took it as she stepped down onto the gravel floor.

Despite the low light, Alina was struck by the splendour that surrounded her. They were stood in front of a magnificent building made entirely of white stone. Lanterns were hung around each doorway. And she could just about make out the silhouettes of Grisha through some of the windows.

*This must be the Little Palace.*

Aleksander noticed her amazement, his lips blooming into a smile as he squeezed her hand.

"Welcome home, Alina."

She let him guide her through the winding corridors. Instinctively, she tried to map the route they took in her head, but her mind refused to cooperate. Despite sleeping most of the way in the carriage, she was still exhausted.

Before long, they arrived at an imposing set of double doors, each inset with a moon in eclipse. Without hesitating, Aleksander pushed the doors open, pulling her inside gently before shutting the doors behind her.

Releasing her hand, he walked over to a cabinet and started pouring two glasses of what looked like kvas.

She took the opportunity to inspect the room they were now in. It appeared to be a war room. A large table filled the centre of the space, upon which sat a series of wooden figures that she

guessed represented various armies. She picked up one of the markers and eyed it; it seemed to be Fjerda.

Curiosity satisfied, she turned to face her soulmate, who had just finished pouring the drinks. He came to stand next to her and offered her one of the glasses. Gratefully, she accepted it. The liquid soothed her parched throat even despite its bitter taste.

They stood in companionable silence for a moment before Alina found herself speaking.

“I’ve never been in a palace before.”

“I hope you’ll find it to your liking,” he replied with a smile.

“Well, I definitely won’t miss sleeping in a tent,” she joked. But suddenly a worry wormed its way into the back of her mind. These were clearly his rooms – the eclipse on the door was proof of that. What if he expected her to give him something she wasn’t ready to give just yet?

She resisted the urge to bite at her lip, but she could not quite keep the hesitancy out of her voice.

“Speaking of... Where will I be sleeping?”

Clearly sensing her worry, Aleksander reached out to take her hand in his once more. She glanced down to where their hands touched – her power thrummed under skin.

“Alina... Look at me,” he asked. She did as he requested. “We don’t have to do anything you’re not comfortable with,” he said. “But it would bring me great comfort if I could know that you were safe in my arms tonight.” His eyes shone with the sincerity of his words.

Alina let herself relax. Truthfully, she did not want to be separated from him either. Gazing up at him, she could see her whole future reflected in his dark eyes. She would never have to be alone again.

Cautiously, she stretched upwards so she was standing on her toes. She closed her eyes and let her lips brush his for a moment. The kiss was chaste, but even that small touch was enough to send electricity racing down the back of her spine. When she opened her eyes, there were unshed tears in his – they reminded her of stars against a night sky.

“Just sleeping,” she said. “But I’d like that.”

Aleksander smiled; the rare sight was a precious gift she was already beginning to treasure. He rested his forehead against hers. They stayed like that for several moments.

Eventually Alina failed to fight down a yawn, her exhaustion once again making itself known.

Understanding her tiredness, Aleksander showed her to his bedroom, the interior of which was just as opulent as the war room. His bed was huge – she was sure she could lie across it

sideways and fail to reach either side. The black satin sheets looked invitingly soft, and Alina ached to sink into them.

Aleksander waited outside graciously while she got ready to sleep. There were no clothes suitable for her in his wardrobe, so she made do with removing the borrowed kefta as well as her mud-stained jacket and trousers, leaving her in only a loose-fitting blouse and pantalettes. Hopefully she would be able to acquire some more appropriate clothing tomorrow.

She settled into the bed, pulling the covers up to her chin. The fabric felt heavenly against her skin. Soon after, Aleksander re-entered the room, now wearing a loose-fitting black tunic and trousers. Pulling back the covers, he climbed into bed next to her.

As if waiting for a rejection, he paused for a moment before shuffling closer to her. Strong arms hesitantly wrapped around her middle, pulling her into his chest. She let out a contented sigh and snuggled closer to him.

Safe in her soulmate's arms, Alina slept.

## Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed it!

As always, comments are very much appreciated :)

# Introductions

## Chapter Notes

Me: I'm gonna write a oneshot!

Also me: I have a few ideas for some scenes, I guess I could add a couple more chapters.

Also also me: Let's turn this into a fully-plotted out multi-chapter fic.

Thank you for continuing to read this fic! Your comments are incredible!

Love you all x

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Aleksander awoke to the feeling of sunshine in his arms. At some point during the night Alina had turned, so that when he woke up it was to the sight of her face tucked securely against his chest.

For several minutes he lay there, unmoving. He could feel her heart beating in time with his own. An unfamiliar sensation filled him; he was... content.

It took nearly all his normally limitless resolve to remove himself from her embrace. But unfortunately for him there were urgent matters that required his attention. So, after dressing for the day, he wrote a quick note and laid it on the pillow next to her. Unable to resist the temptation, he pressed a soft kiss to his soulmate's forehead before leaving his rooms.

The Oprichniki standing guard said nothing as he ordered them to remain on watch outside of the war room. Satisfied that Alina was not unprotected, he walked away, a list of the day's business running through his head.

The first item on his agenda was arguably the least pressing, but Aleksander could not help indulging in a little selfishness, so he soon found himself knocking on the door leading to Genya and David's quarters.

If Genya had been surprised to see him so early in the morning she certainly had not looked it. Her appearance was as precisely put together as always as she opened the door with a smile. That smile remained frozen in place as he recounted his instructions for her - the Sun Summoner would be presented to the King when court opened, and she would need assistance to get ready for such an event.

Aleksander resisted the urge to grind his teeth together as Genya asked – voice dripping with faux innocence.

“And where would I find the Sun Summoner? The Vezda suite, perhaps?”

“You’ll find Miss Starkov in my rooms.”

Genya’s eyebrow twitched upwards.

“Of course, moi soverennyi. Will that be all?”

“There’s one more thing. I have a new project for David.”

He handed over the slip of paper that contained his scribbled instructions. Genya read the note, one eyebrow still raised.

“I’ll make sure he gets started on it right away.”

With an incline of his head, Aleksander strode away, fists clenched. Genya was his best spy, he had honed her talent for the craft himself, but it was still frustrating to know that she was able to read him so easily.

After that it was a blur of meetings. The King rarely rose before mid-morn, so Aleksander met with one of his numerous attendants to inform them of the Sun Summoner’s appearance, and his intention to present her at court. If it had been up to him, he would have gladly kept Alina hidden from the rest of the world indefinitely. But he knew that the fallout should the King think he had been concealing her would be disastrous.

His last meeting of the morning was with several senior figures from the First Army. The purpose was to negotiate the redistribution of resources to make up for the failed crossing; tedious, but necessary. Aleksander’s patience wore thin as the meeting dragged on, but eventually they reached an acceptable compromise.

That led Aleksander to where he was now – walking briskly back to his rooms, eager to reunite with his soulmate.

---

The bed was cold when Alina awoke.

For one heart-stopping moment she thought she might have dreamed the whole thing. That she would be back in her cold tent at Kribirsk, powerless, and with a decade still to go until she would meet her soulmate.

Fortunately, before her thoughts could spiral any further, the sensation of silk sheets against her skin brought her back to reality. Opening her eyes, she saw the rich décor of Aleksander’s bedroom. The room was illuminated by hazy sunlight that filtered through a large window. She stretched lazily, enjoying the softness of the mattress beneath her. So used to the broken springs of her bed at Keramzin and the hard ground at Kribirsk, she had not realised it was possible for a bed to be this comfortable.

Glancing around, her eyes caught on a piece of paper lying on the pillow next to her. Eagerly, she picked it up. It was a note written in elegant, black handwriting.

*Alina,*



*I am sorry to have left you this morning, but I had urgent business to attend to.*

*I will send someone to assist you in getting ready.*

The note was not signed, but it did not take a genius to figure out who had left it. Clutching it to her chest, she smiled at the thought of the man who had been so kind to her the day before.

A loud knock startled her out of her musing. Before she could react, the doors were flung open, and a beautiful woman with flaming red hair strode inside. She held herself with more confidence than Alina thought should be possible, and she wore a red kefta with blue embroidery that fit her impeccably.

Alina flinched upright, pulling the sheets up to her chin to cover herself. The woman carried a heavy-looking wooden case which she placed on the dresser without looking. Instead, she was scrutinizing Alina with a piercing gaze. Alina resisted the urge to shrink away as the woman finished her inspection.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen anyone in more need of a bath,” she said, before turning away from the bed and walking towards another set of doors. “Come along!”

Feeling a bit like she was a sheep being herded about, Alina followed into a large bathroom tiled with grey stone. In the centre of the room sat a large claw-footed tub already filled with gently steaming water.

“Get in. We don’t have much time to get you ready,” said the woman, who had taken a seat in an ornate chair by the door.

“I’m sorry?” Alina questioned, unable to disguise her disgruntled expression. “Who are you? And what do I have to get ready for?”

The woman sighed.

“My name is Genya Safin. General Kirigan asked me to prepare you for your presentation to the King.”

“I’m to meet the King?” The words came out at a much higher pitch than Alina intended.

“Yes. In an hour,” added Genya. “So would you please get in the bath.”

Alina complied. Leaving her dirty clothes in a pile on the floor, she hurriedly climbed into the tub. The hot water felt heavenly as she began to scrub at her arms and legs.

She hesitated over her mark, still unused to seeing the numbers unchanging. Gently, she cleaned around it. The black zeroes looked even more prominent without a thin layer of grime covering them. If Genya noticed her carefulness, she said nothing.

Once she was sufficiently spotless, Genya helped her out of the tub, offering her a long velvet robe that felt wonderful against her now-sensitive skin. Genya guided her back into Aleksander’s room, sitting her down on a plush stool in front of the dresser.

Staring at herself in the mirror, Alina was struck by how much healthier she looked than before. Her eyes seemed brighter, her skin looked less sallow, and the dark bags that usually hung beneath her eyes had started to fade.

As if able to read her mind, Genya began to speak.

“It’s because of your powers,” she said kindly. “We Grisha are sustained by using our gifts. Your body is finally adjusting to its full potential.”

Alina glanced down from the mirror. The words were an uncomfortable reminder that she did not have any control of her summoning yet. She attempted to change the topic of conversation.

“What are your powers?” She asked. “I’ve never seen a Grisha with a red and blue kefta before.”

“I am a Tailor.” Genya’s voice was filled with pride. “I can fix, but I can also modify.”

As a demonstration, she picked up a string of ebony beads out of her kit. Alina watched in amazement as, with a wave of a hand, her tangled hair became smooth and silky. Appreciatively, she ran her fingers through it.

“I will admit, my skills aren’t often used for such simple transformations. Normally, I’m tasked with dealing with problems that require a more *delicate* approach than an Inferni or Heartrender,” said Genya. “But the general was quite insistent that I provide you some assistance.”

“I’m sorry to be a bother.”

“Don’t apologise,” admonished Genya. “I must say it was a pleasant surprise this morning. It’s the first time I’ve seen the general look... well... happy.”

Alina did not know what to say to that, so she sat in silence for several minutes as Genya worked on her hair and makeup. Once she was satisfied, Genya stepped back with a flourish and gestured for Alina to look at herself in the mirror.

For all that Grisha were said to be able to wield the small science, Alina thought that Genya must be able to conjure true magic. She was surprised to realise that she still looked like herself, but now there was a healthy flush to her complexion and there was the hint of the colour gold on her eyelids.

She felt beautiful.

Genya smiled at her amazed expression, before tugging her up off the stool.

“Let’s get you dressed.”

Alina’s mood soured when she discovered what she would be wearing for the demonstration. At some point during her bath a servant must have entered and left a neatly folded set of First Army uniform on the bed. A green jacket was paired with a long skirt that would have been

impractical to wear anywhere near the front lines. The ensemble was finished by a ridiculous-looking golden veil.

Genya helped her into the ensemble, clearly amused by her obvious displeasure.

“This is ridiculous,” Alina complained. “Shouldn’t I be in a kefta or something?”

“I’m afraid the King expects to see a humble girl plucked from the ranks of *his* army,” said Genya, before continuing with a glint in her eye. “Don’t worry, you’ll get your kefta soon. My husband, David, has already started working on it. It’s going to be magnificent.”

---

As he approached the double doors that led to his chambers, Aleksander could hear the sound of idle conversation on the other side. Without knocking, he opened the doors, interrupting Genya’s explanation of court etiquette. Both women turned to face him.

“Thank you, Genya. I’ll take Miss Starkov from here.”

Genya bowed and left the room, that infuriatingly smug expression once more on her face. He waited for the doors to shut completely before approaching Alina. With deft fingers he reached out and lifted the veil that covered her face.

She smiled up at him, a faint blush colouring her cheeks, and his mind went blank. Feeling impulsive, he leaned forward and brought his lips to hers.

Her smile tasted of sunshine. He longed to deepen the kiss, to drown in the feeling of *her* and never resurface. But the rational part of his brain objected – the last thing he wanted to do was scare her.

Reluctantly, he pulled back, one hand reaching out to brush a stray lock of hair away from her face.

“You look lovely.” The words were utterly inadequate to describe her, but her smile brightened regardless.

“I missed you this morning,” she replied, staring up at him with bright eyes.

“Believe me, if I had any choice, I would have gladly stayed in bed with you all day,” he said. “But unfortunately, I am still a general, and there were matters that had to be dealt with.”

“Like the King?” she asked hesitantly.

“Like the King,” he sighed. “Has Genya told you what to expect?”

“She did, although...” her voice trailed off and she began to bite at her lip.

“What is it?” he asked, taking one of her hands in his. His thumb began to rub small circles on her wrist.

“I don’t know how you expect me to do something I didn’t even know I could do three days ago,” she said dejectedly, eyes downcast.

“My Alina.” He waited for her eyes to meet his. “I think you’ll find that you’re much more capable than you realise.”

Squeezing her hand, he let his call run through her. It was not the full extent of his amplification, but she responded to it all the same, her skin beginning to glow.

“All you have to do is trust me. I will be right there by your side.”

She nodded - the blush on her cheeks deepening into a colour that was quickly becoming one of his favourites. He leaned down and kissed her again, savouring the contented sigh that she released against his lips. After a moment he pulled away fractionally so he could look into her eyes. He was pleased to see that the worry that had previously clouded her expression was now gone.

Taking a step back, he offered her his arm with a smile.

“I believe your audience awaits, Miss Starkov.”

Arm in arm they walked through the corridors of the Little Palace, Aleksander pointing out different rooms as they passed by. He’d had to almost drag Alina away from the library lest they miss court entirely. He made a mental note to refresh the books in his quarters. The desire to impress anyone was an unfamiliar sensation, but with Alina he found he was eager to please.

Alina gasped as they stepped out of the doors of the Little Palace. The Grand Palace loomed in front of them in all of its disgusting splendour.

“I think the Grand Palace is the ugliest building I’ve ever seen,” he said.

“It’s very... grand” she offered. His lips twitched upwards as she tried and failed to find a compliment. “I think I prefer the Little Palace.”

“I’m glad. I built the Little Palace to be a home for Grisha.”

*I built the Little Palace to be a home for you.*

Together they crossed the palace grounds. Alina tugged the veil back over her face as they entered through the doors of the Grand Palace.

A selection of Grisha were already gathered in the foyer, a hush falling over the group as he and Alina approached. Next to him, he could feel Alina tense as dozens of pairs of eyes stared openly at them both. He kept his face perfectly schooled as he guided her past them. The group fell in step behind the two of them.

Two servants pushed open the large, golden doors that led to the throne room. Inside, the chamber was filled with an unusually large number of courtiers and soldiers – word of Alina’s arrival must have already spread.

Aleksander watched in amusement as Alina gazed wide-eyed at the extravagant décor. She clutched his arm tighter as they descended the large staircase, not letting go until they came to a stop at the base of the stairs atop which the King and Queen were seated.

The King flicked his fingers dismissively, and Aleksander saw Alina turn towards him with uncertainty on her face. Attempting to school his face into what he hoped was a reassuring expression, he nodded fractionally. Alina removed the veil, handing it to a nearby servant, before turning quickly back towards the King.

“I thought she’d be taller,” said the King.

“I thought she was Shu,” the Queen added. “Well, I guess she’s Shu enough.” She gestured to a serving girl nearby. “Tell her... Oh, I don’t know... good morning.”

Aleksander fought very hard to keep the irritation off of his face. Pyotr and Tatiana were incompetent fools, and he would gladly let his shadows devour them given half a chance. Fortunately for them, now was not the time for such drastic actions.

*But soon...* he thought with grim satisfaction.

*Soon.*

He was brought out of his brooding unexpectedly as Alina spoke up from beside him.

“I don’t actually speak Shu. Your highness,” she added hastily, suddenly remembering who she was speaking to.

Aleksander did not let his reaction to her words show outwardly, but inwardly he felt a small curl of pleasure. Let the Lantsovs play at ruling for now, it would not be long before Ravka would have a truly worthy Queen.

Smugly, he turned his attention back towards the proceedings.

“Then what are you?” The Queen’s words were dripping with condescension.

Alina glanced towards him, that familiar look of uncertainty clouding her expression. A beat passed and Aleksander prepared to speak. But before he could open his mouth, his soulmate turned away and spoke, voice unshaking.

“My name is Alina Starkov, and I am the Sun Summoner.”

Aleksander had never felt more proud. Not letting the Lantsovs respond, he took control of the situation.

“She is my soulmate,” he announced. “And she will change the world.”

With a booming clap, he brought his hands together, letting his shadows rise up from every corner of the room until the entire chamber was swallowed by darkness. Stepping forward, he moved to face Alina, who held his gaze steady even as he could see her breathing quicken.

Leaning forward, he let his lips brush her ear.

“Now call the sun.”

Just as he had done back in his tent at Kribirsk, he took hold of her arm. His thumb gently caressed the edge of her mark as he felt her power rush to meet him.

He refused to avert his gaze as she began to shine. Her light spread outwards, forming a blinding sphere around the two of them that was even larger than when she had first revealed her powers. Gasps echoed around them at the display, the only other sound Aleksander could hear apart from the beating of his own heart.

He did not ever think he would grow used to the way Alina looked when she used her powers.

She was radiant.

And she was *his*.

Eventually, he let his call fade, her light dissipating into a faint glow as he released her arm. The room burst into applause around them. Even the King was on his feet, clapping loudly as he stared down with a greedy expression on his face.

“How long will she need?” The King asked impatiently.

Aleksander took a step forward, positioning himself in between the King and Alina.

“Destroying the fold will be no easy feat. She alone may not be able to do it.” A lie. There was no doubt in his mind that she was capable of anything, but the King did not need to know that. Let Pyotr remain ignorant of the power that he and his soulmate could wield.

“Her place is with me,” he said firmly. “She will remain by my side in the Little Palace to train. Undisturbed.” There was a clear challenge in his words. He waited to see if the King would push back. But, like the coward he was, Pyotr did not take the bait.

“Then train her quickly,” the King demanded. “Our wars have been a noble pursuit, but this chatter from the West about becoming a sovereign nation, that needs to stop. The sooner we are one country again, the better.”

“Agreed... moi tsar.” Aleksander bowed, only just low enough to not be an overt insult.

As he turned away from the King, a figure lurking in the shadows caught his eye. The apparat was staring at Alina with a displeased expression – clearly he disliked that the precious Sun Saint was tainted by her bond to the Shadow Summoner. No matter: the dislike was mutual, and Aleksander was happy for the apparat to meet the same fate as their esteemed monarchs.

Alina eagerly took his hand when he offered it to her. He began to guide her away from the King, towards the assembled Grisha who were watching them eagerly from the base of the large staircase.

“You were *perfect*,” he said.

She beamed up at him. “It was just like you said. The light was everywhere, I just had to let it out.”

He smiled back at her, the act as easy as breathing.

Reluctantly, he released her hand as they reached the group of Grisha. Aleksander took a step back and observed as Alina was swarmed with hugs from the excited crowd. He had to fight back a twinge of possessiveness at the attention she received, but the rational part of his brain knew that isolating Alina would only make her resent him.

There were some parts of her life that he would have to share. But equally, some things would belong only to him.

After a moment, Aleksander noticed Zoya lingering at the edge of the circle of Grisha, an unimpressed look on her face. She did not approach Alina, instead she merely watched. He bit back a sigh – that was a headache he would have to deal with later. He would not let anyone make Alina feel unwelcome, but Zoya was one of his best soldiers and he could not afford to simply banish her to some remote outpost.

Once the hugs and introductions had concluded, he stepped forward, the crowd parting as he moved. Alina slotted herself neatly against his side, taking his arm as he offered it to her. Together they exited the Grand Palace.

The midday sun shone brightly above them as they walked, its brilliance mirroring the smile of the woman beside him.

## Chapter End Notes

Genya is a joy to write.

# Education

## Chapter Notes

Hi all!

Thank you so much for continuing to read this fic. Your support means a lot to me.

Enjoy!

“Good morning solnishka.”

Alina smiled, feeling the soft rumble of the words against her cheek. She opened her eyes, letting the world come into focus slowly.

A strong arm was wrapped securely around her waist. At the same time, a hand gently carded through her hair, long fingers playing with the strands around her face.

She craned her neck upwards so she could see Aleksander’s face. It was getting easier to read his expressions. Right now, all she could think was that he looked at peace.

“Good morning,” she replied.

She allowed him to pull her closer, their lips meeting. He tasted sweet; probably from the three sugar cubes he’d snuck into his tea the previous evening when he thought she wasn’t looking. His fingers continued to play with her hair, the soft pressure against her scalp felt divine.

“I could get used to this,” she said contentedly.

“Don’t tempt me,” he sighed. “Or I’m afraid I might never let you out of arm's reach.”

“Would that be so terrible?” she teased.

He said nothing in response, but the fingers in her hair tightened fractionally as he kissed her again. Eventually, he pulled back.

“We should get up. You have a busy day ahead of you,” he said.

“Right...” she said. Today would be the first day of lessons at the Little Palace and Alina would be lying if she said she wasn’t nervous. Despite the success of her demonstration in front of the King, she had yet to be able to summon light without Aleksander’s help.



Bracing against the slight chill in the room in comparison to the warmth of the bed, she slid out of the covers. Padding over to the large wardrobe, she was pleased to note that it now contained a selection of clothing in her size. She picked out a white blouse, and a pair of long, black trousers. The ensemble was much more practical than the one she had been forced into yesterday.

A warm presence came up behind her as she finished getting dressed. A ghost of a breath tickled her ear as Aleksander leaned in close.

“I have a present for you, Alina. Would you like to see it?”

Breath catching momentarily, she found herself nodding.

“Close your eyes.”

She obeyed unthinkingly. Several anxious seconds passed as Alina listened to the sound of Aleksander’s footsteps. He left the room momentarily, before returning. With a gentle touch, he guided her over to a different spot. If she had to guess, she reasoned that they were standing in front of the large, floor-length mirror positioned near the foot of his bed.

One at a time, he took hold of each of her wrists and slid them through a sleeve. Carefully, he arranged something over her shoulders, smoothing away wrinkles, before buckling what was presumably a belt around her waist.

Seemingly satisfied, he laid his chin on her shoulder. Once more she felt a puff of breath against her ear.

“You can open your eyes.”

Her eyes fluttered open. She gasped.

In the mirror she could see that she was dressed in the most exquisite kefta she had ever laid eyes on. Golden embroidery in the shape of sunbursts cascaded over her shoulders, flowing down towards the cuffs and hem. The fabric itself was a deep black, contrasting with the golden threads like stars against a night sky.

It did not escape her notice that he had chosen to put her in *his* colour. Perhaps that should have made her nervous, that he was claiming her so openly. But instead it only made her feel warm.

She did belong to him, just as he belonged to *her*.

At some point, her mouth had fallen open unflatteringly. She closed it with a gulp. The man standing behind her chuckled.

“Do you like it?”

“I love it,” she said honestly.

Turning to face him, she flung her arms around his neck. He smiled against her cheek, the slight scratching of his beard tickling her as he laughed.

"I'm glad. You deserve the world, Alina"

Their serenity was interrupted after a few minutes by the rumbling of Alina's stomach. She glanced down nervously, but he merely chuckled.

"I think it's time for breakfast."

They ate together at a small table in Aleksander's study, which was adjoined to the war room. A servant came and placed a tray of fruit and pastries which Alina eagerly devoured. As they ate, they talked amicably about what her lessons would be like and what were his plans for the day. A few times their feet brushed under the table and she would have to push down the stutter of her heartbeat with each contact.

Their conversation continued even after they finished eating, until they were interrupted by a light knock at the door. She expected Aleksander to get up and answer, but instead he made a gesture to her with one hand.

"I believe that's for you," he said casually.

Alina stood and crossed the room nervously. Unsure what she would find on the other side, she opened the door. She had barely managed to crack it open by more than a few inches when an excited voice piped up from the other side.

"Hi! My name's Marie and this is Nadia. General Kirigan asked us to show you to your first lesson."

Two women in blue keftas stood just outside the doorway. Alina vaguely recognised them from the group of Grisha who had been present for the demonstration yesterday. Before she could formulate a response, they each wrapped an arm through hers' and began to pull her down the corridor, chattering enthusiastically.

Craning her neck backwards, Alina thought she could just about make out a bemused smirk on Aleksander's face before the door to his quarters shut.

---

Aleksander sat at his desk, mulling over communications from the front lines. He had just received the morning report from Ivan. The man was painfully succinct in his delivery, but Aleksander always appreciates his second's directness.

After the report, he had dismissed Ivan with orders to review the security of the Little Palace. There could be no mistakes when it came to Alina's safety.

Roughly ten minutes passed in silence before there was a knock at the door.

"Enter."

Without hesitation, Zoya pushed open the door and stepped inside. Letting the door shut behind her she turned to face him.

“You wanted to see me?”

Aleksander took a breath before he responded, considering his words carefully.

It was not a secret that he sometimes played favourites when it came to his Grisha. Over the years, there were often students that stood out because of their natural talent either for the Small Science or for other matters. He would take these Grisha under his wing to nurture their talents.

Zoya was one such student. She was a powerful Squaller and an excellent hand-to-hand fighter.

However, Aleksander was not blind; he was well aware that she desired him. He had never encouraged those feelings, but the fact remained that they existed. He also knew that she lacked self-restraint if she did not have something to focus on.

“I have a task for you,” he said.

“Of course,” she replied, back straightening slightly.

“You are one of my best fighters,” he said. Predictably, Zoya preened at the praise. “It has come to my attention that the Sun Summoner has gaps in her education that need to be filled. I would like you to ensure she is properly trained in hand-to-hand combat.”

Zoya looked ready to argue. “Shouldn’t Botkin...”

“Botkin is responsible for ensuring *all* Grisha are properly schooled in combat,” he interrupted. “The Sun Summoner’s safety is of paramount importance, which is why she requires personal tutoring. I would only entrust this to someone who I thought was capable. If that’s not you then I’m sure I can find someone else who would be happy to.”

She was silent for a moment, fists clenching and unclenching. He wondered briefly whether he had miscalculated, whether jealousy would win out over her desire to impress.

“I’ll train her,” she said eventually, jaw tight.

“Good.” He sat back in his chair, satisfied. “I expect weekly reports on her progress. You’re dismissed”

---

Despite Alina’s nerves, she found herself laughing with Marie and Nadia as they escorted her between lessons. The two women were perfectly happy to fill her in with all of the gossip in the Little Palace. They had tried to needle her for information about General Kirigan, but had quickly moved on when she had clammed up, cheeks turning a bright red.

The three of them were currently headed to the training yard where she would have her first combat lesson. After a rather boring introduction to Grisha history, she was itching for the chance to stretch her legs.

She had tried hard to ignore the stares and whispers that followed her throughout the corridors of the Little Palace. It was only natural, she mused, that she would stand out. The black kefta and Aleksander's declaration to the King had certainly made sure of that. She only hoped that eventually she wouldn't be quite such a spectacle.

The combat instructor called out to her as the three of them approached. Nadia helpfully informed her that his name was Botkin, and Alina was pleased to note that he was also Shu. It made her feel a little less out of place.

"Sun Summoner. You have many enemies who would see you dead," he said. "We will make sure that does not happen."

She stiffened at the reminder that so many people wished her harm.

"Do you know how to fight?" he asked.

"A little," she replied, thinking back to the boxing lessons Mal used to give her when they both had free time.

"Show me. Pick an opponent," said Botkin.

She glanced around at the assembled Grisha, most of whom had stopped their own exercises to watch. Before she could decide on who to pick, she saw a familiar-looking Squaller stalk determinedly towards her with an unimpressed look on her face.

Well... Alina had never been one to back down from a challenge.

"Her," she said, pointing at the scowling woman.

"Zoya Nazyalensky," said Botkin. "One of my best students."

Zoya stepped into the ring.

"Let's see what you're capable of," said Zoya.

Alina raised her fists, trying to replicate the form Mal had taught her. Without hesitating she swung a fist at Zoya. She ducked quickly and in one fluid motion swept a leg under Alina's feet so she fell to the ground. She landed with a thud, the wind temporarily knocked out of her.

"Too slow," said Zoya dismissively.

Alina scrambled to her feet.

"We go again," she said, brushing the dust off of her kefta. Alina once again resumed a fighting stance.

This time Alina attempted to wait to see what Zoya would do. However, Zoya refused to take the bait, merely standing, hands by her side. Frustrated, Alina swung a fist again. This time, Zoya caught it, and with a twist, flung Alina onto her back, pinning her down with one knee.

“You leave yourself wide open when you swing,” said Zoya. “You’d be dead at the first strike if I actually wanted to kill you.”

With a jerk, Zoya released her from the pin, standing up and beginning to walk away. Thoroughly fed up at this point, Alina stood up quickly, and before she could react, threw a third punch at Zoya.

Her fist collided solidly with Zoya’s face.

For a moment, there was silence as the whole training yard stilled. Zoya was breathing heavily, eyes screwed shut. Alina suddenly remembered that Zoya was not just an excellent hand-to-hand fighter but also an expert Squaller, and Alina would be defenceless if Zoya decided to fight with her powers.

Fortunately for Alina, Zoya seemed to decide against squalling her into a nearby wall. Instead, she turned to face Alina, a look of begrudging respect on her face.

“So you’re not completely useless after all,” she said at last. “I can work with that.”

“I’m sorry?” asked Alina, confused.

“The general asked me to train you. He’s concerned that you’re utterly defenceless at the moment.”

Biting back an insult, Alina signed. She may not like Zoya, but she was willing to admit she had a lot to learn when it came to self-defence. And if Aleksander thought she could benefit from the extra training then she trusted his judgement.

“Fine. Show me what I need to do.”

---

Alina’s whole body ached when Marie and Nadia came to collect her for lunch. Unsurprisingly, Zoya was a slave driver when it came to teaching, so Alina was desperate for a respite.

The dining hall was packed by the time the three of them arrived. Grisha wearing all different colours mingled between tables, eating and talking animatedly. She was pleased to spot Genya seated at one of the tables. The tailor sat in between two men, one in purple and one in red. The man in red was talking energetically with Genya, while the man in purple was instead engrossed in a small notebook. Alina’s lips twitched into a smile when she noticed that although one of his hands was scribbling furiously in the book, the other was interlaced with Genya’s hand.

Both Genya and the man in red paused their conversation as Alina, Marie, and Nadia took the seats across from them.

“Alina, I don’t believe you’ve been introduced. This is Fedyor,” said Genya, gesturing to the man in red who smiled warmly at the introduction. “And, this is my husband, David.” She gestured to the man in purple, who glanced up from his notebook briefly with a nod before returning to his writing.

“Don’t mind him. He’s a man of few words. Tell me, how have you found your first day of lessons so far?”

Alina found it was easy to open up to the small group as they chatted over lunch. David said very little as they ate, but Genya and Fedyor were more than happy to make up for his silence, effortlessly carrying the conversation. Over the course of the meal, Alina was informed of all sorts of information about the goings on in the Little Palace.

At one point, another man joined their table, slipping silently in the seat next to Fedyor. She recognised him as the stern-faced Heartrender from back at Kribirsk. To her surprise, Fedyor leaned over to the man and gave him a quick kiss on his cheek.

“Ivan dear, have you introduced yourself to Alina yet,” Fedyor asked the man, who had already started eating.

Ivan looked up from his meal and grunted a quick hello in her direction before returning to his food. Fedyor smiled apologetically in her direction.

“The general keeps him very busy, so he doesn’t often have much time for lunch,” he said in explanation.

The rest of the meal passed enjoyably, until regretfully it was time for Alina’s next lesson. The one she had been dreading.

---

Alina knocked once on the door to the small hut where she would have her first summoning lesson. Several moments passed with no response, so she knocked again. When still there was no response, she cautiously pushed open the door, finding it unlocked.

The first thing she noticed as she stepped inside was the heat. A roaring fire filled the centre of the room, which felt more like a cave than a dwelling. Despite the heat of the fire the room still managed to feel dark, and she had to squint in order to make out any details.

“Hello...?” she called out cautiously.

There was no response.

Stepping into the room further, she let the door close behind her, trapping her in with the oppressive heat. The room was so quiet she almost wondered if she had been sent to the wrong place. However, before she could decide what to do, a voice echoed through the small space.

“You’re late.” A woman stepped out of the shadows. It was almost as if she materialised out of thin air with how suddenly she appeared. “Let’s have a look at you.” She began to circle

Alina, staring at her with a penetrating gaze.

Alina guessed that this must be Baghra. Both Aleksander and her new friends had warned her that the woman was difficult to impress. Refusing to cower, Alina kept her chin up as Baghra finished her inspection, the woman eventually taking a chair next to the fire. Her face was unreadable as she gestured for Alina to sit opposite her.

The fire crackled as Alina sat stiffly on the uncomfortable wooden chair.

“Where are your parents?” asked Baghra, with not a hint of warmth.

“Dead, I assume,” replied Alina stiffly.

“Where did you grow up?”

“Keramzin.”

“You slipped through the cracks and stayed where you didn’t belong.” Condescension was dripping from Baghra’s voice as she spoke. “Where do you belong?”

“Here, with Ale... at the Little Palace.” The name almost slipped off of her tongue before she remembered the conversation with Aleksander in the carriage. Unfortunately she was not quick enough for Baghra to miss her mistake.

“A Sun Summoner, more preoccupied in trailing after her soulmate than in honing her power,” Baghra scoffed.

“That’s not true,” said Alina indignantlly.

“Prove it then,” replied Baghra. “Show me your power. Show me that you can summon the sun without the general clutching your wrist.”

Alina looked away. Staring at her hands she brought them together, willing the light to listen to her. However unlike in the tent at Kribirsk or in the throne room the light would not come. It felt like water, slipping through her fingers before she could grasp it. Frustrated, she let her hands drop to her lap.

“I thought not,” said Baghra. “His blood and bones amplify other Grisha. It's not because you're *special* , not because you have a *connection* .”

Alina flinched involuntarily at the harsh words.

"You think you know everything about him, just because he gave you his name and dressed you in his colour. Do you think he'd look twice at you if you didn't have those powers?"

Alina was too stunned to speak, shocked by the venom in Baghra's voice.

"Leave. Come back when you're capable of thinking for yourself," ordered Baghra.

Still reeling, Alina fled the hut, not stopping until she once more emerged into the bright light of day.

"How did it go?" A sympathetic voice came from nearby.

Still blinking from the harsh light, Alina was surprised to see Genya. She smiled sympathetically, clearly noticing Alina's shocked expression.

"It could have gone better," Alina replied honestly.

"Don't take it personally. Baghra doesn't like anybody," joked Genya.

Alina hummed in response, but her thoughts were clouded. Baghra's dislike certainly felt personal, although she had no idea what she had done to earn the woman's ire.

Slipping an arm through Alina's, Genya began to guide her away from the hut and back towards the Little Palace. Genya did not press for details of the disastrous lesson, and for that Alina was grateful.

They walked in companionable silence through the manicured gardens. Butterflies flitted between neatly trimmed rose bushes, reminding Alina just how far she was from the mud and dirt of the army camp at Kribirsk.

Just before they reached the doors that led to the Little Palace, the relative peace of the courtyard was disturbed by a group of riders thundering in at high speed. Three large horses came to a stop just in front of the doors, each carrying an Etherealnik and one other person.

"Healer!" shouted one of the Summoners. Swiftly dismounting, they pulled their passenger off of the saddle, grunting as they fell limply into their arms.

The other two Summoners followed suit, each helping their companions off of their horses. Even from a distance, Alina could see that each of the three civilians were covered in blood. Several Healers in red keftas rushed out of the Little Palace towards the commotion.

With a start, Alina made to rush forward and help. But before she could move, Genya placed a hand on her arm.

"Let the Healers do their job. They know what they're doing," said Genya softly.

Alina watched as the wounded were ushered inside, the youngest of whom looked to be only a child.

"Who are they?" asked Alina, voice trembling slightly.

"Refugees from Shu-Han, if I had to guess," answered Genya.

"Do many refugees come to the Little Palace?"

"Not as many as we'd like," said Genya, voice laden with sorrow. "The general offers asylum to any Grisha, regardless of birthplace. But not many survive the journey. Too many end up



in laboratories in Shu-Han or captured by Druskelle.”

Not for the first time that day, Alina was stunned. She’d always known that Grisha were hunted, but hearing stories was nothing compared to seeing proof of it with her own eyes.

“Come on, let’s get inside.” Genya gently tugged at her arm, and Alina let herself be escorted inside, mind still reeling.

---

Aleksander had hoped to be able to spend more time with Alina that evening. He’d had plans, including a candlelight dinner in his, in *their* , quarters. Unfortunately for him it seemed there were forces conspiring against him.

The King had called him into a meeting, shortly before dusk. Apparently, the supplies delayed by the failed crossing had included Pyotr’s preferred wine, and the King had demanded Aleksander explain exactly how long before the crossing could be attempted again. Aleksander had repeatedly explained that his Durast’s were still investigating the issue that caused the skiff to be attacked in the first place. But the King cared little for Grisha lives, especially at the expense of his own comfort, so had been unwilling to listen to reason that the crossing was too dangerous for the time being.

By the time Aleksander had managed to persuade the King to be patient, it was well past nightfall. He strode quickly away from the meeting room, eager to be back in the familiarity of his palace.

His pace slowed slightly as he approached the doors to his quarters. Opening the doors softly, not wanting to disturb a sleeping Alina, he stepped inside.

The war room was dark as expected, however he could see a faint glow coming from the bedroom. Stepping silently, he made his way to the doorway and peered inside.

Despite the late hour, Alina was not asleep. Instead she was sitting crossed legged in the middle of the large bed. A lit candle sat on the dresser, illuminating the room in a warm glow. She was dressed in a lace nightgown and her hair was down, falling in soft waves over her shoulders.

Drawing his shadows closer to him so he would not interrupt this precious moment, Aleksander leaned against the doorframe and watched.

Her face was the picture of concentration as she stared intently down at her hands. Deliberately, she brought her hands together, before pulling them apart. Her nose scrunched as she focused, and Aleksander was pleased to see a small flicker of light between her palms. The light lasted for a second before disappearing. Alina let out a huff of frustration.

Mood much lighter than before, he let his shadows fall away.

“Good evening,” he said.

She looked up, startled. A faint blush began to colour her cheeks.

“Hi,” she said, letting her hands fall to her sides.

“How was your first day of lessons?”

“Oh, you know,” she shrugged. Glancing down at her hands she admitted softly, “I don’t think Baghra likes me very much.”

He resisted the urge to scowl at the mention of his mother. The two of them rarely agreed on anything these days, and Baghra had made it clear throughout their long existence precisely how much she valued the concept of soulmates.

“Don’t concern yourself with trying to get into her good graces. She thrives on being contrary,” he said in response.

She looked up at him, a defeated expression on her face.

“She’s right though. I’ll be a lousy Sun Summoner if I can’t ever learn to summon without your help,” she said.

Aleksander sighed. Coming to a decision, he shed his kefta, placing it on the back of a nearby chair, and quickly unlaced his boots. He slid onto the bed behind Alina, pulling her so that she was situated in between his legs.

“What... Aleksander?” she questioned.

“Shhh...” he soothed, pressing a soft kiss to the crown of her head. “Trust me.”

Slowly, he felt her relax. Tension released from her muscles as she lay with her back against his chest. They stayed like that for a while, hearts beating in sync.

Eventually he moved. Taking each of her hands in his, he brought them together once more. His call ran through her faintly as he pulled her hands apart.

A small sun appeared, floating in between their interlaced palms.

“I’m pretty sure this is cheating,” she grumbled, as the sphere of light hovered in front of her.

He chuckled.

“Not cheating. I call it gentle encouragement for my favourite student,” he said. “Now, I want you to focus on the light. Can you feel how it flows through you?”

She was silent for a moment, her fingers twitching as she considered his question. Eventually she hummed in agreement.

“I think I feel it,” she said.

“Good,” he said, letting the call fade. The light shimmered for a moment before dissipating. “Focus on that feeling and try again.”

This time she brought her hands together without his help. He felt her inhale a breath, before separating her palms. Her eyes must have been shut, because she was still for several seconds before she gasped.

Floating in between her hands was a miniature sun. It shone unflickeringly, casting a golden light that illuminated the whole room. The light was far brighter than the small candle that had previously been their only light.

"I did it." Even though he could not see her face, he could hear the smile behind her words. A warm surge of pride glowed within him.

"You did," he said. "I knew you could."

She spun in his arms. The light disappeared as her concentration dropped, but neither of them paid it any kind mind.

With a laugh, she kissed him. Her smile was infectious, and he found himself smiling too as he drowned in the taste of her.

"Thank you for believing in me," she whispered against his lips.

His hands wrapped around her waist, pulling her closer.

"Always," he said. "I've always believed in you."

# Confessions

## Chapter Notes

We interrupt your regularly scheduled tooth-rotting fluff with something a bit different. This chapter was challenging to write, but it's absolutely necessary to the story.

The tags don't lie, these two will get their happy ending.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Hours bled into days, which bled into weeks, which bled into months. Alina blinked and suddenly three months at the Little Palace had passed.

At least once a week she wrote a letter to Mal. She told him about the friendships she had gained: Genya, Marie, Nadia, Fedyor, David, even Ivan if he'd been less surly than normal that week. Sometimes she ranted about her lessons with Zoya - when her limbs were particularly stiff after a grueling workout. Details about her lessons or whatever book she managed to devour that week spilled onto paper, proof of the life she was slowly building for herself within the Little Palace.

Of course, she didn't tell Mal everything. Not how it felt when Aleksander drew her into his arms after a long day, nor the way he looked at her sometimes - like she cannot just summon the sun, but she is the sun itself.

Most weeks she received a reply. Mal filled his letters with details of his time in the First Army - funny stories about Mikhael and Dubrov that normally made her chuckle, and tidbits about his latest hunt. Hearing from Mal helped to soothe the gap that had formed when she had left him in the medical tent at Kribirsk. Her brother in all but name had been a constant in her life for so long, and she missed him. But his absence was not the piercing ache that she knew she would feel if she were to be separated from Aleksander.

In one of the first letters from Mal, one that arrived not too long after she had first come to the Little Palace, he had informed her that his unit had suddenly been reassigned. Before the fold, before *everything changed*, the 36th regiment had been due to travel North to the Fjerdan border. However, without warning they had been reassigned to a smaller base near Ryevost.

Alina had nearly wept at the realisation that Mal had been moved somewhere safer. Somewhere where he would not be in the direct line of fire and his biggest danger was the occasional brawl that he loved to gamble his money on.

She had brought up the sudden reallocation with Aleksander at their dinner that evening - suspecting his response but wanting to be sure. He had merely shrugged and repeated his promise that he would do anything to make her happy. Including ensuring that her only

family would be stationed somewhere away from the worst of the fighting. Alina had failed to fight back the tears that came to her, eternally grateful that she had such an understanding soulmate.

She was happier than she could ever remember being.

But underneath that happiness there was a tiny seed of doubt. It had been planted the first time she had seen the numbers stamped on Aleksander's forearm. She had yet to ask him about what she knew the numbers meant. After all it did not really matter how long he had waited for her, surely it only mattered that they had finally found each other.

And yet... there were other things that caused that seed of doubt to grow. Small things. Things that on their own would mean nothing, but put together began to paint a picture that she could not quite understand.

There were the lullabies he would sometimes sing to her. When he thought she was asleep, he would stroke her hair and sing in a voice so quiet she would have to strain her ears to hear him. Sweet tunes fell from his lips in a language she did not quite understand. It sounded almost like Old Ravkan but somehow she knew it was a language even older.

Then there was the way he would sometimes flinch awake in the middle of the night, choking back a strangled shout. He never spoke of his nightmares, but on those nights he would always pull her close and hold her tight against his chest. As if she might slip through his fingers and disappear into the moonlight. He was not alone in suffering from nightmares. Sometimes when she closed her eyes she could still hear the flapping of wings against the endless dark, and the cut-short screams of her fellow cartographers.

And finally there was the fact that they had done no more than kiss in the months she had been at the Little Palace. His desire for her was clear to see, and he must know that it reciprocated. *Saints*, how she wanted him. But it was as if there was an invisible barrier, stopping him from pushing any further. Alina wished she were brave enough to tear it down, but she would admit that she was scared of what she might find on the other side. What secrets were holding him back.

So, she said nothing. Merely waited, hoping against hope that one day he would break down the last of his walls and let her fully into his heart.

---

Aleksander was tired of secrets. Ever since Alina had burst into his life, illuminating the dark shadow of his soul, he had been happy.

He was happy, but the secrets he had hidden deep within himself clawed at his insides. Lies were the very foundation of his existence, and yet that foundation was beginning to crack. Sunlight began to slip through, exposing the truth within.

His secrets would not remain secrets forever. Perhaps if his soulmate had been any other person than Alina. If he had been cursed to only share one mortal life with his soulmate

instead of the eternity the Saints had chosen to bless him with. Then he could have lived a lie, fed them only enough to keep them by his side, and never had to expose the truth of his soul.

But, for reasons unknown to him, the Saints had chosen to bless him. They had chosen to give him the one boon he had never dared wish for - that he could have his soulmate by his side forever.

Except, with eternity came the surety that one day, she would find out. It may not be for a year, ten years, a hundred years. But one day she would find out and she would leave him. For who could choose to stay in the face of such a monster.

He tried to decide what would hurt more: to lose her now when their bond was so fresh, so brimming with potential, or to lose her later, when she had consumed his life entirely, leaving nothing left of him that wasn't touched by her light.

The choice was a lie. Whenever it happened, it would destroy him.

Deep within his heart, there was a tiny seed of hope, hope that perhaps she would not run. Perhaps she would look at the worst of him and still choose to stay. Everytime she smiled at him the seed grew a tiny bit. Everytime he heard her laughter, or held her in his arms the seed grew a tiny bit more.

The secrets were killing him, slowly but surely. So he grasped at that tiny seed, poured all his wishes and dreams into it and came to a decision.

He would tell her.

---

The day started like any other.

Alina awoke, content and happy in Aleksander's arms. He was already awake, seemingly satisfied to just watch her. She might have thought it creepy if he were anyone else. But he was her soulmate, and besides, she would be lying if she said that she had never watched him while he slept. The years melted off him when he was asleep. Stress and worry faded away until she thought she could see a glimpse of the boy underneath the man.

Before she could even murmur a greeting, he had pulled her into a searing kiss. This did not feel like any of their previous kisses - soft and tender and delicate. Instead there was a desperation behind it that she could not source. Eagerly she had kissed back, thinking that maybe this was it, that he was finally able to admit that he *needed* her, just as she needed him.

Then, just as suddenly as he pulled her in, he pulled away.

She could not stop the whine that escaped her lips. A mixture of desperation and confusion swirled in her head, but one look at Aleksander's face shocked her out of her haze. Unshed tears filled his eyes, and he looked at her the way someone might look at a shooting star. Beautiful, but temporary.

“What’s wrong?” One of her hands came up to touch his face as she asked the question.

He blinked the tears away and shook his head.

“Nothing, my sweet,” he said quietly.

She did not believe him, but she thought if she pushed him then he might close off even more.

“Come riding with me today?” he asked after a moment, voice wavering slightly.

“Of course.” She tried to sound reassuring, but the sorrow in his eyes did not clear.

They dressed and ate in relative silence, a tension in the air that neither of them were willing to address. Side-by-side they stepped out of the Little Palace; above them the sun shone bright, a contrast to the dark mood of her companion.

Their horses were already tacked up as they reached the stables. She smiled as she stroked the neck of her white mare, the horse whinnying in response to her affection. Behind her, Aleksander mounted his black stallion. Alina also climbed onto her horse and together they rode out of the palace courtyard.

---

Aleksander stayed quiet as they rode deeper into the forest that bordered the Little Palace. He did not trust his voice not to crack.

Beside him, he felt Alina glance his way more than once. The tension in her body was impossible to miss and he longed to reach out, to reassure her that everything would be fine.

But that would be a lie, and he would not let there be any more lies between them.

He slowed his horse as they reached his chosen destination. The old fountain came into view, crumbled stone and fallen branches strewn around it. Reluctantly, he came to stop, dismounting in one smooth motion. Alina copied, giving one last pat to her horse's neck as she did so.

With a shaky breath, he stepped towards the fountain. The coin that he pulled from his pocket felt heavy in his hand. Closing his eyes he held it to his lips, willing all the hope that bloomed within him into his one wish.

*Please don't leave me.*

He flicked the coin into the water. Watched it as it sunk to the bottom - one last wish settling among a hundred others.

Steeling his resolve, he began to speak.

“Ever since I built the Little Palace, I have come here.” He stared down at the rippling water, at the hundreds of gold coins settled on the fountain floor. “Every year, I’d come here. Throw

a coin. Make a wish in the fountain. The same wish, every time... For you to be safe."

Blinking back the traitorous tears that threatened to fall, he turned to face Alina. He would not shy away from her as he laid his soul bare. She deserved that much from him.

"Everything I've done... Everything I've *ever* done is so that wherever and whenever I'd find you, you would be safe."

She held his gaze. Compassion swam in her eyes. He dreaded the moment when that warmth would fade - when she would turn away from him and never look back.

"There are things I must tell you. Secrets I've kept." He took another shaky breath. "I'm afraid I'm not the man you think I am, and for that I am sorry. I wish I could be someone worthy of you."

She reached out to touch his arm. "Aleksander, whatever you need to tell me. I promise I'll..."

"Don't say that," he interrupted. "Don't make promises you won't be able to keep."

A rebuke looked ready to form on her tongue, but with a sigh she bit it back. She nodded carefully, like he was some frightened animal that might spook at any sudden movements.

Bracing himself for the inevitable rejection, he continued.

"When I was a boy, there was nowhere safe for Grisha. Even in Ravka we were hunted. Healers were drowned for helping the wrong person. Squallers were burned by the very fires they were trying to put out. To be Grisha was to hide or be killed

"For many years my only goal in life was to survive."

Pausing, he pulled at the sleeve of his kefta, exposing the black numbers imprinted into his arm. Though they no longer shifted, he could still feel the rhythm of their countdown in his soul. Their beat was the silent music of his long existence.

"I had only one thing in this world. And that was the knowledge that someday I'd get to meet you."

She smiled at him. The sight was a more precious gift than all the diamonds in the world.

"As soon as I discovered what my mark meant, I made it my life's mission to build a world where you would be safe. The Second Army. The Little Palace. I built it all so that Grisha would have somewhere to belong. But it isn't enough. And it will never be enough to atone for what I've done."

He continued to look at her. If this was the last time she would look upon him without fear or hate then he would savour it.

"I told you when we first met that I have been waiting a long time for you," he said carefully. "You never asked how long that was, and for that I am grateful. Because the truth is..." The



words caught in his throat. “The truth is that I have been waiting for you for over five-hundred years.”

Emotions flickered across her face - shock, confusion, contemplation. And he saw with horrifying clarity her moment of realisation - the moment she figured out what his confession meant.

Sorrowfully, he continued. “Four-hundred years ago I made a deal with the King. He was fighting a war that he could not win, not without my help. So I bargained with him - I would win him his war in exchange for protection for Grisha. He agreed.

“But when the last battle was won, he grew fearful of my power. He put a bounty on my head and on the head of any Grisha. I gathered as many Grisha as I could and we ran. It took less than a month for the King to find us. They slaughtered every single Grisha under my care, even the children.”

He can no longer keep the tears from falling.

“I was so *angry*. They were under my protection and I failed them. All I could think of was what if that I couldn’t protect them then how could I protect you?

“When the King’s men came for me, I fought back. I could have killed them, but that would not have solved anything. The King was willing to sacrifice any amount of lives if it meant he stayed in power. So instead of killing them I did something much worse.”

He remembered the fury, freezing his veins like ice. He remembered the utter certainty he felt that what he was doing was right. And he remembered the all-consuming pain when he was proved wrong.

“I meddled with a power beyond what any Grisha should be able to wield. My goal was to control the King’s army. To turn his own men against him. To build an army that could keep Grisha safe. Perhaps my plan might have even worked, but the power I had sought to control was too strong. Instead of creating an army, I created something much worse.”

He could see in her eyes that she knew what he was about to confess.

“I created the Fold.”

She flinched away from him, eyes wide. A dagger through his heart would have hurt less.

---

Alina couldn’t breathe. She stared at the man that had become her whole world and her heart ached.

His confession was still swirling in her head as she tried to come to terms with what it all meant. Her soulmate was the most hated man in all of Ravka. He was responsible for the worst blight the world had ever seen. She tried to reconcile that with what she knew of Aleksander and found she couldn’t.

It would have been easier if he had become unrecognisable. If his features had twisted into the monstrous creatures from the stories then maybe she could have run. Could have left him behind and never looked back.

But he was the same man she had always known him to be. The tears spilling from his eyes proved the depth of his sorrow and she found she could not abandon him. Not without at least trying to understand *why*.

Her voice trembled as she spoke.

“Do... do you regret it?”

The question seemed to startle him. He inhaled a shaky breath before he responded.

"With every fibre of my being."

Those dark eyes implored her to trust him, and she found she wanted to. *Oh*, how she wanted to.

She tried to imagine what he must have felt. What desperation could have driven him to create such an abomination, even by accident.

What would she have done, if she were faced with such a choice?

She realised with a start that she did not need to imagine it. She had faced that same dilemma and to her shame she had made the same choice.

Breaking eye contact she turned towards the gently rippling water of the fountain. Unable to look him in the eye, not out of fear for him but guilt for herself, she found the gaze of his reflection.

Voice barely above a whisper, she began to speak.

"I wasn't meant to be on the skiff that day in Kribirsk," she said, still staring down at the water. "You knew that already. But what you don't know is why I ended up there."

Through his reflection, she could see that he was barely breathing. His shoulders were tight with tension, and she gripped the cold stone underneath her fingers to stop herself reaching out to run a hand down his arm in comfort.

"My friend Mal was assigned to the crossing. Growing up, he was all I had. You'd always felt so far away, like a dream I could never quite remember upon waking up. I was so scared to be left with no one, that I decided to follow Mal into the fold.

"I knew they'd need someone to replace the Novokribirsk maps if they were damaged. So that night I snuck into the head cartographers tent and burned them. I thought I could volunteer to replace them, and then I'd be assigned to the skiff."

The guilt that she had been suppressing since that day surged to the surface.

"But that's not what happened. Instead of just me being assigned, they assigned my whole unit to the skiff. And then in the fold... when we were attacked..."

Her throat suddenly felt like sandpaper. Try as she might, the words would not come. She repeated their names in her head like a prayer.

*Alexei, Petya, Raisa, Liev...*

"They're all dead because of me."

It was the first time she had admitted her greatest shame. Beneath her she saw Aleksander's reflection distort. It took her a while to realise the disturbance was from her tears. They fell thick and heavy into the water.

"But the worst part..." She can't help it anymore, she turns to face him. Their eyes meet and all of a sudden she is back in his tent, heart pounding and soul bared. "The worst part is, I'd do it all again, because it meant I got to meet you."

He reached for her then. A calloused hand hesitantly cupped her cheek, thumb wiping away tears in a soothing motion. She could not help but lean into it, seeking the comfort that only he could provide.

"Alina..." he said before trailing off, seemingly at a loss for words.

"Aleksander," she said, holding his gaze steady even through her tears. "I can't say that I don't have questions; we'll need to make time for that later. But I can promise you that I won't leave you. Call me selfish, but I couldn't bear to live a life without you in it."

"Anything... *anything*..." His voice cracked, relief thick and heavy in his words. "I'll do anything to be the man that you deserve."

"You already are," she said gently, but she could see in his eyes that he did not believe her.

Just as she had done that very first night in the war room, she stretched up onto her tiptoes and placed a gentle kiss upon his lips. They tasted of salt from where his tears had fallen. Her decades of loneliness seemed almost insignificant in the face of his centuries of waiting, but she tried to channel all of her longing, all her devotion into the kiss. So that he would understand just how much he meant to her, just as she understood how much she meant to him.

She could not leave him. It would *destroy* her.

There would be time later to figure out what it all meant for them. But for now they had each other, and for Alina that was enough.

Thank you for reading!

I couldn't just sweep this conversation under the rug and I hope I did it justice. I promise we'll be back to our usual fluff next chapter!

# Search

## Chapter Notes

This chapter ended up being slightly longer than the previous chapters. I hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

*Cold snow on the ground.*

*Birdsong in the distance.*

*The smell of pine needles.*

*A flash of white fur.*

Alina woke with a start from her dream. Involuntarily, she shivered, the feeling of ice still fresh in her mind.

Glancing at the window she could just make out the faint glow of sunrise. Satisfied that she would not have to leave the comfort of the bed for several hours, she went about trying to banish the last of the chill that still had her in its grips.

Rolling over, she found Aleksander on the other side of the bed, facing away from her. She let out a quiet huff of frustration.

Three days had passed since their conversation at the fountain. Aleksander was clearly under the mistaken impression that she wanted him to give her space. It was easy to see that he was still terrified she would change her mind and flee. She had reassured him repeatedly that she would not leave him, but centuries of doubt were not so easily quashed.

Shifting closer, she slung one arm across his chest and curled up behind him. He didn't stir as she pressed her face into the crook of his neck. He was pleasantly warm and she let out a contented sigh as the last of the residual cold from her strange dream faded away. That same sensation of calm and surety that always accompanied his touch washed over her and she soon found herself slipping into a dreamless sleep.

---

Alina was disappointed to find that the bed was empty the next time she awoke. Vaguely she recalled hearing a murmured "Good morning, milaya", and the feeling of a soft kiss to her forehead, but she couldn't be sure if it had really happened or if she had just imagined it.

In any case, she had a busy day of training ahead of her. She swiftly got dressed in her black kefta. Aleksander was nowhere to be found in their chambers, so she made her way to the dining hall, not wanting to eat breakfast alone.

The day passed without incident. Her combat training with Botkin and Zoya was progressing steadily, she'd even managed to land a few more hits on Zoya recently. The other woman never offered praise, but Alina could tell that her cold demeanor towards her had softened slightly in the recent weeks.

After combat training, came her usual lessons on Grisha theory, history, and politics. The lessons were interesting, but she could feel her attention slipping after several hours of lectures. Try as she might, her mind kept wandering to Aleksander. They hadn't spoken much more on the secrets he had confessed, but now that Alina had had the chance to gather her thoughts, she had questions.

Her last lesson of the day gave her no chance to daydream. Baghra's lessons were as grueling as ever, her words and cane equally bruising. Despite the woman's harsh teaching methods, Alina could begrudgingly admit that her summoning had come on leaps and bounds since she had first arrived at the Little Palace. However Alina was more inclined to attribute her progress to the private lessons Aleksander would give her when they both found the time. His soft words of encouragement in her ear, as she summoned dancing tendrils of sunshine, was a much better motivator than Baghra's criticism.

Once she'd been released from Baghra's grueling lesson, Alina made her way back to the rooms she shared with Aleksander.

Pushing the door open tentatively, she found the war room empty. However, a glow of lamplight from the study told her where she would find her soulmate. Approaching the half open door, she could see him slumped in the plush sofa that rested against one of the study walls. There was what seemed to be a report on his lap, but he was clearly distracted, gaze loosely fixed out of the window that overlooked the Little Palace courtyard.

He immediately sat up straight as she approached, shoulders tight and eyes immediately turning towards her.

"Alina," he said hurriedly.

Muscles aching from her long day of lessons, she suddenly wanted nothing more than to sink into his embrace. Before he could react, she crossed the room and collapsed into the sofa next to him. Kicking off her boots, she lay down on her side so that her head rested in his lap.

He hastily set aside the report that he had been pretending to read. His hands hovered inches from her face as he seemed unsure what to do with them.

"You don't need to give me space, Aleksander," she said gently. "I promise you I'm not going anywhere."

He let out a sigh, one hand coming softly to rest in her hair.

“I didn’t want to push,” he said. “You have every right to be angry at me.”

“I’m not angry,” she replied. “But I do have questions if you're willing to answer them.”

“Of course. I knew you would.” Unconsciously his hand began to stroke her hair. The sensation relaxing her further into his lap.

She stayed silent for a moment, considering where best to start.

“What are your plans for the fold?” she asked eventually.

“We tear it down. Together.” The conviction in his words was obvious.

“Good,” she said. “That’s... good.” Up until that moment she had not been sure that he didn’t have some other plan. But the strength of his declaration banished those doubts.

She thought of her next question.

“Will we be able to tear down the fold?” Her powers had come a long way from the tent at Kribirsk, but even with Aleksander’s amplification there was no way her light could cover the entirety of the fold.

“I have no doubt that you could do anything. Including destroying the fold,” he said. “You may need an amplifier and more training. But eventually, yes, we’ll be able to tear it down.”

Amplifiers had been mentioned in several of the books in the Little Palace library, so she was familiar with the concept. Zoya had even shown her the tiger tooth that formed her amplifier in one of their numerous lessons. Still, even with the added power, Alina did not think her light would be strong enough.

“What sort of amplifier would I need?” she asked.

Long fingers continued to run through her hair. Occasionally his fingertips grazed against her scalp, the soft touch putting her at ease like nothing else could.

“The strongest amplifiers are Morozova’s amplifiers,” he said. She nodded, remembering one of the books she had read on Ilya Morozova - the Bonesmith. “They’re said to be three animals of incredible power: the stag, the sea whip, and the firebird. Some say their existence is a myth, but I’m inclined to believe they are real.”

“Why?”

“Because the same power that runs through them also runs through me.” At her confused look, he elaborated. “Ilya Morozova was my Grandfather. His experimentations with amplification are the reason that I am a living amplifier.”

The revelation stunned her, and she took several moments in silence before she asked her next question.

“So say we managed to find one of these creatures, then we could destroy the fold?”

“Yes, with you strengthened with one of those amplifiers, we could tear it down. Although we will have to be careful that we can still protect Ravka with the fold gone.”

“What do you mean?”

“As much as the fold hurts Ravka by cutting us off from the West, it also offers a certain amount of protection from Fjerda and Shu-Han.”

She hummed in acknowledgement. “So we’d need to find a way to end the wars with Fjerda and Shu-Han or we’d be even more exposed to attack.”

“Precisely,” he said. “If done in the right way, such a show of power should be enough to convince them to enter peace talks with Ravka, but I’m concerned that the King will not offer suitable terms for negotiation.”

She thought of the refugee Grisha that came to the Little Palace from Fjerda and Shu-Han, eyes hollow and spirits broken.

“The King doesn’t care for the suffering of Grisha,” she said carefully, aware how close to treason her words sounded. “He wouldn’t secure their protection in a peace treaty. So what can we do instead?”

The fingers in her hair stilled, and his expression suddenly turned deathly serious. He seemed to consider his words carefully before speaking.

“We kill the King.”

A few months ago the words would have shocked her. Then again, a few months ago she was a very different person. She mulled the idea over in her head, expecting to feel the righteous indignation of a loyal Ravkan citizen, but finding instead that she agreed with the plan.

In her short time at the capital she had witnessed first hand how the King and his court overindulged and partied while the common folk starved. And she had listened on many occasions to Aleksander’s frustration that he was unable to offer better protection for Grisha.

Could she honestly say that the country would not be better off with someone else on the throne?

She could not.

Of course, that thought led her to the natural follow up question. Instinctively, she knew what Aleksander’s answer would be, but hesitation was thick in her voice when she asked.

“Who would you crown instead?”

The hand that had been in her hair moved down until it was resting against her cheek. Unconsciously, she leaned into it and he smiled. It was the first time he had smiled at her since the fountain, and the sight sent a feeling of warm contentment down her spine.

“Do you even need to ask *moya tsaritsa*?”



---

*Bright sunlight reflecting off of a frozen river.*

*Snow capped mountains in the distance.*

*A huge white stag standing majestically among trees.*

*Large horns twisting into the shape of a crown.*

Alina could not help the gasp that escaped her as she shot upright. The dream was fresh in her mind, and unlike previous nights it did not seem to fade as she became aware of her surroundings.

“What’s wrong?” There was an edge of panic to Aleksander’s voice as he sat up, bleary-eyed next to her.

“Just a dream,” she said, but even to her ears it did not sound convincing.

“Alina, you’re crying.”

She brought one hand to her face and was surprised to find tears. Hastily she wiped at her eyes with the sleeve of her night dress. She felt disorientated, like there was something important she was missing, but she didn’t know what it was.

“Will you tell me about it?” asked Aleksander hesitantly. He brought one hand to rest against the small of her back, rubbing soothing circles to try and calm her down.

He succeeded. She settled back against his side, curling her legs so she was almost draped on top of him. With her head against his chest she could feel the faint hum of contentment he let out at her affection.

“I was in a forest. It was snowing,” she said, choosing her words carefully. “There was a huge white stag, with the largest antlers I’ve ever seen.” The hand on her back stilled. “The dream felt familiar, like I’d dreamt it before. But this is the first time I can remember it while awake.”

Aleksander was quiet for a long moment, before he spoke.

“That sounds like Morozova’s stag.” His tone was calm, but she knew him well enough to recognise that beneath his calm facade his thoughts were whirling.

“It’s probably just a dream, right?”

“It’s not uncommon for Grisha to dream about their amplifiers. That’s usually how we find out which animals have the capacity for amplification,” he said. “Did you see anything that could help narrow down its location?”

“Somewhere north, based on the weather,” she said. “I could see mountains, so probably somewhere in Fjerda, or at least near to the border.”

A disgruntled expression crossed his face at the mention of the northern country.

“That’s a start,” he said. “I’ll send out orders to start the search,”

“Wait,” she said, thinking of the danger that plagued the Fjerdan border. What if there was a way to find the stag’s location without putting any soldiers at risk? “I have an idea, can you give me a few days?”

“As you wish,” he replied.

Slowly, as if waiting for permission, he leaned down to kiss her. She tilted her head towards him in invitation. When their lips met the rest of the world melted away, and all she could feel was him.

---

Aleksander wandered aimlessly through the corridors of the Little Palace. Alina had disappeared from their chambers with a smile that morning. She hadn’t mentioned what her plan to find the stag entailed, but he trusted her implicitly. A few days was nothing to someone as old as him, and he had to admit that the less people knew about the stag the safer it would be for Alina.

And there was nothing he valued more than her safety.

In some ways, the last few days had felt like a dream. At every moment, he expected to wake up to the inevitability he’d constructed in his head since he had met Alina. That he would find that she had fled from him in terror and disgust.

But as hours and days passed, to his surprise this dreamlike state did not end. She was still here, with him. He could still hold her close and kiss her, and in her eyes he saw none of the horror that he had feared more than anything. Although he was not a religious man, he had thanked every Saint, every deity of every religion, that she had chosen to stay.

He had no real direction in mind, but subconsciously he found himself drifting towards the library. The magnetic pull of his soulmate guided him. His heart a compass that only ever pointed towards *her*.

As he approached, he could hear excited chatter from within. Alina’s voice he recognised immediately, but it took him a second to pick out the voice of Genya. Stopping in the doorway, he took in the sight before him.

The two women were both leant over the large table at the centre of the room. A truly impressive array of books and papers were strewn all around them. From this distance he could not make out any titles, but he recognised various maps of both Ravka and Fjerda on some of the pages. Stepping closer, he also saw that there were various books on plants, wildlife, and weather patterns.

Neither of them had noticed him yet, their attention instead focused on a map of the Permafrost that was spread out on the table between them. He watched as Alina ran both

hands through her hair, an unconscious gesture he recognised to mean she was particularly excited.

“It has to be here,” said Alina eagerly, pointing at a spot just north of Chernast. “It’s the only place where these two species of pine tree both grow.” She gestured animatedly at one of the open books, that pictured sketches of different conifers.

“I think you may be right,” agreed Genya.

Aleksander coughed lightly to announce his presence. Both women looked up, startled. Alina’s face quickly bloomed into a smile, the sight just as wonderful as the first time he had seen it.

In a flash, she rushed round the table and flung her arms around his neck. Unprepared for the sudden embrace, he staggered back briefly, his hands coming to rest at her waist as he steadied himself.

“I found it! I know where the stag is,” she said breathlessly.

Knowing his reputation as a fearsome general had long been in tatters when it came to Genya, he succumbed to the urge to kiss Alina. The sweet intoxication of her laughter tasted divine.

“That’s amazing, milaya,” he said. “How did you manage it?”

“Turns out all of those mapmaking skills I learned in the First Army have a use,” she said with a laugh. “They always told us to pay attention to the flora and fauna, not just physical landmarks. There’s a particular combination of trees that I saw in the dream that is unique to one region. It’s just past the border into Fjerda, near Chernast. That’s where the stag is.”

“You are a wonder,” he said, kissing her again.

The moment was broken by the sound of shuffling papers. Reluctantly, he remembered that they were not in the privacy of their rooms, but instead in a public place where any of his Grisha could interrupt. Alina withdrew her arms from around his neck. She glanced nervously towards Genya who was pointedly not looking in their direction as she started to clear up the mess of books.

Absent-mindedly Aleksander brushed at the fabric of his kefta, smoothing the wrinkles that Alina had caused. He heard a small chuckle from Genya, which he stubbornly refused to acknowledge. Instead, he addressed Alina.

“It’ll take several days to prepare a tracking party. But we should be able to leave for Chernast before the week is out.”

Then the hunt could begin.

---

Just as Aleksander had promised, four days later a small group of Grisha left the Little Palace. Alina's whole body thrummed with nervous excitement as they left. It was the first time she had left the walls of the Little Palace since her discovery, and a part of her was eager to be back on the road.

Their party consisted of only those Aleksander deemed most trustworthy. Ivan and Fedyor came along of course, the two Heartrenders being the most powerful in the whole of the Second Army. Next was Zoya, who Alina had even started to think of as a friend, although she did not know if the feeling was mutual. The last Grisha who travelled with them was David. His presence on the expedition had confused Alina, since the soft-spoken man was not known for his fighting prowess. But Aleksander had told her that a Fabrikator was necessary to gain an amplifier, so she hadn't questioned him further. A small collection of Oprichniki also traveled with them for further protection, but all-in-all their group was not a large one.

They set out before dawn on the first day. Alina rode next to Aleksander, her kefta covered by a black, fur-lined cloak to disguise her identity. They rode for several hours before Aleksander gestured for the party to slow down.

She pulled at her reins gently, her horse responding naturally to her orders. They had just arrived at a set of crossroads. An old wooden sign indicated that the left-hand road led to Balakirev and the right-hand road led in the direction of Ryevost.

Sitting on a rock between the forked roads, was a man dressed in a brown coat. He looked up as they approached. His face was covered by a hood, but he reached up and pulled it down as he stood, revealing his smiling expression.

It had been several months since she had last seen him, but she would recognise Mal anywhere.

"Mal!" she called in surprise while swinging off her horse. She rushed forward to pull him into a hug.

"Hi, Alina," he said, returning her hug.

"What are you doing here?"

"Your general wrote to me. He said you were in need of a tracker."

A small glow of warmth buzzed through her at the sound of Mal calling Aleksander *her* general. She fought to keep her mind focused on the present.

"We do need a tracker." She gave him one last squeeze before pulling away. "It's so good to see you, Mal."

"It's good to see you as well," he said.

A loud voice called out from behind her. "We need to keep moving," said Aleksander gruffly. "There'll be time for you to catch up later."

She nodded and turned away from Mal to climb back onto her horse. One of the Oprichniki appeared with a spare horse for Mal to ride. Together their group set back off on the road.

Alina pulled her horse to ride in step with Aleksander's stallion. Reaching over to take his hand, she smiled at him, hoping her gratitude would shine through his hard exterior.

"Thank you." She spoke quietly so only he could hear her. He did not respond directly, but his lips twitched upwards fractionally in acknowledgement.

Side-by-side with her soulmate, she rode on.

---

The chill of a winter's evening had truly set in by the time they stopped for the night. Aleksander ensured that Alina was settled by the small campfire, before seeing to his duties.

Once he was satisfied that the camp would be well guarded overnight he returned to his soulmate.

He was slightly irritated to find her talking enthusiastically to her tracker friend, and he briefly regretted inviting him on this expedition. His reasoning for inviting Oretsev had been two-fold. The first was that Alina had insisted to him that Oretsev was the best tracker in the First-Army, and while he suspected her judgement to be biased, he knew her well enough to know that she was not embellishing too much.

The second reason was because he knew it would make her happy.

Aleksander watched as Alina threw her head back in laughter at something the tracker had said. Jealousy was a constant battle when it came to Alina, but he fought against the greed he felt for her attention. Instead, he admired the way her smile was illuminated by the soft glow of the campfire. For her, he would suffer through much, including the presence of an annoying otkazat'sya

Alina must have sensed him brooding, because her head turned in his direction. With a crook of her fingers, she beckoned him over. And as always, he was powerless to deny her.

As soon as he was in arms reach, she reached out and grabbed a fistful of his cloak and tugged. Obliging, he sank onto the floor next to her, his legs crossed beneath him. She immediately pressed herself into his side.

"You're warm," she murmured in response to his bemused expression.

"Ah," he replied softly. "Well at least I'm good for something."

She merely smiled at him, before turning her head and continuing her conversation with the tracker.

Aleksander sat in silence as the two friends talked. He was not interested in eavesdropping on their discussion, so he kept his attention focused on making sure the rest of the camp was

being properly set up. Although he had to admit that a small part of his mind was entirely distracted by the comforting weight of his soulmate at his side.

Eventually, the sound of chatter faded. He glanced down, and found that Alina had fallen fast asleep, her head resting comfortably on his shoulder. Tenderly, he brushed a stray strand of hair away from her face.

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see the tracker determinedly not looking in his direction. They sat in an awkward silence for several minutes before the boy worked up the courage to speak.

“She seems different,” said Oretsev.

“Of course she's different. She's finally where she belongs,” snapped Aleksander.

“That's not what I meant,” Oretsev huffed. “She seems... happier.”

Aleksander pushed down at the feeling of defensiveness that had roared every time he was in the tracker's presence.

“I only want what's best for her,” said Aleksander.

“I do as well,” replied Oretsev with a sigh. “When we were growing up, she was always dreaming about when her numbers would reach zero. I don't think you're what she expected for her soulmate.”

“Your point?”

“My point is that she's waited a long time for you, and if you hurt her...” he trailed off.

“Are you trying to threaten me?” Aleksander asked incredulously.

“I'm not stupid. I know I'm no match for you in a fight,” said Oretsev. “But if you hurt her, I'd give it my best attempt.”

“Your courage is admirable, but that will not be necessary,” replied Aleksander. “I have no intention of hurting Alina.”

“Then I guess we can agree to coexist.” Oretsev offered his hand. Aleksander considered the look of determination in the man's eyes, and with a shrug grasped hold of it. Their hands shook once before they both released their grip.

“For Alina,” said Mal.

“For Alina,” replied Aleksander.

---

Their journey north took almost a week. Every morning Alina awoke wrapped tightly in Aleksander's arms. The warmth of his body pressed against hers banishing the chill of the icy

weather. Then, after a quick breakfast, the party would set out for another long day's ride.

She was pleased to notice that after a rough start, Aleksander and Mal seemed to have warmed fractionally towards each other. They rarely spoke, but she caught the way their eyes would sometimes meet, an uneasy truce between them.

Grateful that she would not have to break up any fist fights between her soulmate and brother, she instead focused on preparing for when they found the stag. Aleksander had explained to her the process for claiming an amplifier - she would need to kill the stag and then a piece of it would need to be fused to her body.

The whole process put an uneasy pit in her stomach. She had never killed anything before, let alone an innocent creature like the stag.

The stag still visited her in her dreams, imploring her with sad eyes each time. But try as she might, she could not decipher its meaning.

Her anxiety increased as they travelled, a tangled knot in her stomach that only tightened as they approached their destination.

They left their horses in Chernast. Aleksander explained to her that their horses would make too much noise, and they needed to avoid any Fjerdan raiders that may be lurking in the permafrost.

After that, the search for the stag could truly begin.

She and Mal worked in tandem to lead the group through the snowy forest. Alina focused on the geography of the area, guiding the group based on what she could remember from her dreams. Whenever they came across animal tracks, Mal would take over. His uncanny ability to follow even the faintest trail led them down several dead ends, but eventually Alina could feel that they were getting close.

It was late evening when she felt the stag approach. The camp was set up ready for the long night and she was almost ready to retire when she felt it.

There was a prickling on the back of neck, as if she was being watched. She turned her head sharply to try and see what was causing the strange sensation. At first she could see nothing, but then she saw it. A faint white glow through the trees.

Hurriedly, she stood up and began to walk towards the light. Her head was fuzzy, almost as if she was still dreaming. All she knew was that she needed to find the source of the glow.

"Alina?" The confused voice of Aleksander reached her ears, but she kept walking. Behind her she could hear the sudden rush of movement as the rest of the camp moved to follow her. Her feet picked up their pace until she was running through the thick snow, dodging under branches and around trees.

At last she emerged into a familiar clearing, where she came to a faltering stop, the sight before her almost bringing her to her knees.

Standing in front of her was her stag.

He stood tall, taller than should have been possible for any deer. His antlers curved jaggedly into a crown above his head. They were so large that they almost doubled his height. His pure white coat glowed faintly, like a full-moon, illuminating the clearing with its pure light.

She felt the others approach behind her. The stag tensed, one hoof pawing at the ground as it let out a nervous cry.

“Stay back,” she warned. “He’s frightened.”

Cautiously, she took a step forward, holding her hand outstretched to try and reassure the stag. When he didn’t back away, she took a few more steps. The stag stared at her. In his eyes she could see nothing but sadness and her heart broke for the creature.

She was now only a few feet away. Staying completely still, she waited to see if the stag would approach. After a tense few moments, he did. He took two steps towards her and gracefully lowered his head towards her outstretched hand.

The moment her hand touched the soft fur of the stag’s forehead, she felt a surge of power. Her light intertwined with the stag’s, creating a dome of starlight that engulfed them both.

She heard gasps from behind her. Turning her head, she saw Aleksander gazing at her with a look of wonder and sympathy in his eyes.

“You have to be the one to kill it, Alina,” he said gently.

Now that she was here, in the stag’s presence, she realised that she could not do it. The stag was connected to her, to kill him would be to kill a part of herself.

“What if there’s another way?” she called back, an edge of desperation in her voice.

The stag nudged at her hand, and she turned back to face him. She let him guide her hand upwards along his face until she was touching the base of his horns. The skin was raw and inflamed. He bleated mournfully as she ran her fingers lightly over the tender area.

Suddenly, she understood the cause of the sorrow in his eyes.

“You didn’t ask for this,” she said softly, stroking her hand down the side of the stag’s face. “It’s causing you so much pain, isn’t it? This power is too much for you to contain. You just want to be rid of it.”

She brought her forehead to rest against the stag’s.

“Let me take it from you,” she said. “So you can live a life free from this burden.”

The stag let out a low note. Somehow she knew that he was giving her permission. Closing her eyes, she focused on the point where their foreheads touched and tried to imagine that she was opening a gateway.



Suddenly she felt a surge of power. It flowed through the stag and into her like a flowing river. Her skin prickled at the sensation, the energy spreading throughout her body in a wave.

Eventually she felt the rush slow to a trickle, and then it stopped altogether.

She opened her eyes.

The unnatural glow of the stag's fur had faded to nothing. His eyes swam with gratitude. He pressed his forehead against hers once more before he straightened to his full height. Instinctively she took a few hurried steps back, before watching as the stag shook his head sharply.

There was an almighty *crack* , and with it, the massive antlers that circled above him fell away from his head. The noise of their landing was muffled against the snow, but even so they made a loud thud as they landed.

He bowed his head low, still staring directly at her. Then the moment was over. He turned away and fled into the trees.

She watched him go, tears streaming down her face, until eventually he disappeared from view. Unable to move, she stood frozen in the middle of the clearing.

A gentle hand came to rest on her shoulder and she jumped unconsciously. Glancing to the side, she saw Aleksander, who was now standing right next to her.

Overwhelmed with emotion, she turned and buried her face in his chest. Strong and secure arms wrapped around her waist, holding her close as he whispered soft encouragements in her ear.

"I'm so proud of you, milaya," he said to her.

Not trusting herself to speak, she stayed quiet. After a long while, she managed to get her tears under control. She pulled away from him slightly, before stretching up to kiss him. The kiss was gentle but that was what she needed right now. The evening's events had left her feeling raw, but she trusted Aleksander to pick up the pieces and put her back together.

Eventually they parted, she wiped at her wet cheeks with the sleeve of her kefta. Aleksander turned to the rest of the group and gestured to the fallen antlers.

"Collect the horns for Alina's amplifier," he ordered.

"I don't need them," she said in realisation. "The stag chose me. He's already given me his power."

In demonstration, she brought her hands together. The sphere of light she conjured required little effort at all, but even so it was larger than any orb she had been able to summon on her own before.

"You never cease to surprise me" said Aleksander reverently. "Then let us keep the horns as a memento. It would be wasteful to leave them here."

She nodded in agreement. Reaching out, she took hold of one of his hands. Their combined power rejoiced as they touched, but she pushed down at her light, not wanting to warn the whole forest of their location.

Exhaustion was beginning to creep into her bones. In that moment she wanted nothing more than to be back in their chambers at the Little Palace, wrapped safely in her soulmate's arms.

"Aleksander," she said quietly.

"Yes?"

"Take me home."

He smiled. "As you command."

## Chapter End Notes

Next up is the Winter Fete!

Thank you so much for reading <3

# Devotion

## Chapter Notes

It's time for the Winter Fete. I hope you enjoy reading this chapter as much as I enjoyed writing it!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Aleksander was pleased to note that their journey back to Os Alta passed without incident. They left Alina's tracker on the outskirts of Ryevost to rejoin the rest of his unit. And Aleksander would admit that he only felt a mild twinge of jealousy at the strength of the hug she gave him before they departed.

The sun had long set by the time their small party arrived at the Little Palace. Alina practically threw herself onto their bed once they reached the comfort of their rooms. He allowed her to pull him down next to her once he had shrugged off his kefta and boots. Their legs tangled together, exhaustion from the long journey finally catching up to the both of them. It was not long before they both fell into a deep slumber, wrapped in each other's embrace.

The next morning, Aleksander rose early. Alina reached for him as he got out of bed. She was still fast asleep, but her subconscious sought him out regardless. With great reluctance, he dressed and left their rooms.

There was something he needed to do.

He strode with grim determination through the gardens of the Little Palace. He did not bother to knock when he reached the door to the small wooden hut. Instead he pushed his way inside without warning.

The interior was oppressively hot as always, reminding him just how much he hated spending time here. Letting the door slam, he took one of the seats near the fire, opposite the old woman who was glaring at him with suspicious eyes. He glared back.

"Mother."

"What brings you here, boy?" she spat back.

"I'm here with a warning." His words were cold. "Whatever your plans are for Alina, you will stop."

"And what plans would those be?"

“You think you can turn her against me.” A twitch of her eyebrow was her only reaction to his words. “It won’t work.”

“So sure of yourself. So sure of those numbers on your skin,” she said, condescension dripping from her words. “You think she’ll stay beside you once she knows what you did - what you’re planning to do?”

“Tell me, Mother. What exactly do you think I’m planning on doing?”

“You’ll bind that idiot girl to you as a slave.” Baghra did not raise her voice, but her tone was pure venom. “And you’ll use her power to turn the fold into a weapon.”

His eyes screwed shut for a moment. Disbelief and indignation coursing through his veins.

It was true that there was no love lost between him and Baghra, but to hear that his own mother thought him capable of such atrocities shocked him. A hot flash of righteous anger surged under his skin.

“You think so little of me? How dare you!?” He was shouting now, his words reverberating off the stone walls with the force of his emotion. “I have spent the last four centuries searching for a way to atone for the disaster I created. And now that salvation is in sight, you think I’d squander my chance by turning the fold into a weapon? I want to destroy the fold. And I will do with Alina by my side as my equal, not my *slave*.”

Baghra looked like she wanted to interrupt, but he would not let her. Centuries of bitterness poured out of him.

“You’ve only ever wanted to see the worst of me. Nothing I ever do will be enough to prove to you that I’m anything other than the *monster* you think I am. And now that I have Alina, now that I have the one thing I’ve wished for above else, you want to destroy that too. But the truth is that I’m not the monster, *you are*. You can’t stand to see me happy, can you? So you’d drag me down into misery along with you, rather than accept that I don’t need you anymore. That I’ve never needed you.

He stood up, squaring his shoulders. “And as for Alina. She knows what I’ve done, and she still chose to stay.”

Baghra’s eyes were wide with shock. For the first time in his life it seemed he had rendered her speechless.

With the end of his outburst, he found his anger cooling into pity for the woman before him. Unable to stand the sight of her anymore, he turned on his heel and stormed out.

---

After their return from the North, the days passed quickly for Alina. The palace was consumed by preparations for the upcoming Winter Fete. Excited chatter filling the hallways as Grisha prepared for the influx of guests to arrive.

She couldn't help but be swept up in the excitement for the Winter Fete. Lessons had temporarily been postponed with so many Grisha busy with the preparations. Unfortunately for her, she found that her schedule was no less busy. Between the fittings for her ceremonial kefta, etiquette lessons on how to greet the many guests, and dance lessons to learn the numerous waltzes that she would be expected to execute, she was desperate for a respite.

Her last appointment of the day had just concluded: a meeting on her schedule for the night itself that she'd attended along with Marie who would be acting as her body double. Marie was very excited at the prospect of getting to wear such elaborate jewelry, but even her bubbly chatter could not distract Alina from her aching feet from such a long day. So, offering Marie a quick hug, Alina excused herself to tiptoe back to her chambers.

When she pushed open the door to the war room she was met with the sight of Aleksander bent over the large table at the centre of the room. His kefta was draped over a nearby chair, and the sleeves of his black tunic were rolled up to his elbows. She briefly admired the way the muscles of his forearms flexed as he moved one of the markers on the map.

He must have sensed her staring, because he looked up. His face blooming into a smile when he saw her. She walked up to him, the ache in her feet now forgotten. Without her needing to ask, he bent down slightly, allowing her lips to meet his in a soft kiss.

She sighed happily, letting him support her weight as she leaned against his chest.

"Remind me why I need to learn how to greet people in seven different languages for the Winter Fete?" she asked begrudgingly.

He smiled sympathetically. "It's important you make a good first impression. As frustrating as it may seem, having allies in court will be important." One of his hands reached up to brush a stray hair behind her ear. His touch lingered on her cheek. "Don't worry. I'm sure they'll adore you."

"You're just biased," she grumbled.

He chuckled. "Perhaps. But that doesn't make it any less true."

A ray of warm light from the setting sun caught in his smile as he laughed, making his skin glow golden for a moment. She was struck, not for the first time, by just how beautiful he was. Her heart jumped into her throat as an unvoiced feeling came over her.

"Aleksander, I l..." she trailed off, suddenly unsure.

"Yes?" he asked. The calmness of his tone told her that he hadn't figured out what she was trying to say. She knew that soon she'd have the courage to tell him how she really felt. But it seemed that that day was not today.

"Nothing," she whispered, leaning up to kiss him again. His lips tasted of home.

---

The morning of the Winter Fete dawned bright and clear. Aleksander had warned Alina that he had many preparations to make in the final hours before the Fete started, so she was prepared to wake up to an empty bed.

Bracing against the slight chill of the room, she got out of bed and padded over to the wardrobe. Her outfit for the Fete was still in the Fabricator workshop so she instead dressed in a simple black dress.

After that she went to find Genya.

She barely managed two knocks on her friend's door before it opened sharply and Alina was dragged inside.

"Good, you're here. Sit down, we don't have much time," said Genya as she manhandled Alina to sit in front of a large vanity.

"Genya we have hours before the Fete starts," said Alina in an exasperated tone.

"This is your introduction to the world, Alina. I'm not letting you go out there with even a single hair out of place."

With that Genya got to work. Alina's hair was brought to a lustrous shine before being twisted and pinned into an elaborate updo. Genya worked on Alina's face with a well-practised blend of tailoring and makeup.

As the start of the Fete drew closer, Alina found her nerves creeping up on her. Her fretting was interrupted however, by a knock on the door.

Genya opened the door to find David holding a sealed garment bag.

"Thank you, dear," she said, kissing him on the cheek as she took the bag from him. "I'll see you at the Fete later?"

His reply was too quiet for Alina to hear, but she could see Genya smile at his response before he shut the door.

Genya laid the bag delicately on her bed. She made swift work of the knots that held it closed, pulling it open to reveal the kefta within.

Alina gasped.

Unlike her usual kefta, which was midnight black to match the colour that Aleksander wore, this kefta looked like it was made of liquid gold. She ran her fingers over the fabric, admiring the feel of the smooth satin beneath her fingertips.

She then noticed that the kefta was not purely gold in colour. Black swirls of embroidery decorated the entire bodice, cascading down to the sleeves and hem. In many ways it was the complement of her original kefta, but the statement Aleksander was trying to make was clear. She was powerful in her own right. His equal.

Still admiring its design, she shrugged the kefta on. As she secured each golden button, she found her mind drifting. Her brain conjured images of long, calloused fingers undoing the buttons one-by-one. Her heartbeat quickened ever so slightly at the thought.

She was so lost in thought, that she didn't immediately notice Genya speaking to her.

"Alina, come on. It's nearly time."

A lump formed in Alina's throat as she glanced towards her friend. Genya seemed to notice her nerves immediately.

"You'll be fine," she said encouragingly, taking one of Alina's hands to lead her out of the door. "General Kirigan will be with you the whole night. If you can't trust yourself, then at least trust him."

"Thanks Genya," said Alina with a small smile. "You always know what to say."

The corridors of the Little Palace were already bustling as they weaved their way through the crowds. Two stern-faced Oprichniki followed behind them, keeping any overly eager guests from bothering Alina before she and Genya could reach their destination.

Eventually they reached the antechamber where she was to wait for Aleksander. Her entire body was tight with nerves as she listened to the merriment just outside the doors. Fortunately she did not have to wait long before the door opened fractionally and the man that she had been waiting for slipped inside.

"Aleks..." His name caught on her tongue as her eyes took him in.

He was wearing a new kefta. That in itself was not surprising, nor was it surprising that it was made out of a rich, black brocade. However, what took her breath away was the detailing that curled over his shoulders.

At first glance, it looked no different to the usual embroidery that adorned his kefta. But as he moved, the detailing caught the light, illuminating fine strands of golden thread that weaved throughout the embroidery. Her colour.

They moved towards each other at the same time, their lips meeting with a fiery intensity once they reached one another. His hands cupped her face, the touch igniting her skin.

He pulled back slightly, and she found her chin tilting upwards, chasing the taste of his lips. She managed to sneak in two more kisses before his mouth was out of reach.

Staring up, she could see that his pupils were blown wide, his already dark irises disappearing into pure black.

The fingers still holding her face caressed her cheek softly. "You are a vision, milaya," he said, voice full of wonder.

She smiled up at him, nerves almost entirely forgotten.

“Are you ready?” he asked her.

“I am.” As she spoke she knew the words to be true. “Promise you won’t let me fall?” she joked.

“Never.” He offered her his arm, and she took it gratefully. Like two halves of the same whole, they fit together perfectly. With one last encouraging squeeze of her hand, he guided her out of the antechamber and towards the ballroom.

The grand room fell into silence as the two of them entered the ballroom. Both Grisha and dignitaries quickly vacated to the edges of the room, leaving a space in the centre of the floor for the first dance. .

Alina was prepared for the fact that as the guest of honour, the first dance would be performed by her and Aleksander alone. She felt a bit like a deer caught in a hunting trap as so many people stared at her. But before her anxiety could overwhelm her, she felt the ghost of a breath tickle her ear.

“Keep your focus on me,” whispered Aleksander encouragingly.

She took a steadying breath and nodded her head slightly.

Aleksander guided her to the centre of the floor. Just as he had asked, she kept her eyes locked on his face. With their eyes connected It was easy to forget that there was anybody else in the room.

Distantly, she heard the sound of music beginning to play. Aleksander placed his right hand comfortably on the small of her back, offering his left hand for her to take. She settled in against his chest, resting her left hand on his shoulder.

The first few steps of the dance were simple.

*Back. Right. Close.* She recited in her head, feeling her feet move somewhat clumsily beneath her. Sensing her hesitation, Aleksander once more whispered in her ear.

“Don’t think. Just feel.”

She let herself relax slightly. For the next bar of music she heeded his advice. Aleksander moved, and she followed.

Several beats of music sailed by as they drifted gracefully around the floor. Alina found her confidence growing as the music progressed.

She looked at Aleksander and found that he was smiling. It was an indulgent smile that made her feel secure in his arms.

A mischievous glint twinkled in his eye as he pivoted suddenly. Alina clung tightly to his arm as the room raced by her. Round and round they spun, the music swelling into a crescendo around them.



She fought to contain the bubble of laughter that threatened to escape her lips. Looking at Aleksander she could see that he was on the verge of laughing too.

She felt safe, here in the arms of her soulmate. The one person she trusted with every part of her. She realised in that moment that she wanted to have every part of him too.

A faint chuckle tickled her ear, barely audible over the music.

"You're glowing, solnishka."

Alina blushed as she realised he was right. A soft glow illuminated her skin, her powers drawn out by the desire she felt for the man holding her. The light faded from her skin with a little concentration. There would be time for that later, when she would perform a proper demonstration of her powers.

Eventually, the music came to an end. Effortlessly, Aleksander twirled her under his arm. He bowed before her, bringing her hand to his lips to place a gentle kiss to her knuckles, and she was reminded of their first meeting back at Kribirsk. The moment her life changed forever.

The sound of thunderous applause shocked her out of her recollection. She stared wide-eyed around at the onlooking crowd, suddenly reminded that she and Aleksander were not actually alone. A different song began to play, a tune with a quicker tempo than the first. More couples stepped onto the dancefloor, both dignitaries and Grisha, ready for the second dance.

Out of the corner of the eye she spotted some of her friends. Genya was dragging a nervous looking David onto the floor. She even thought she saw Ivan smiling as Fedyor excitedly asked him for a dance.

Turning back to Aleksander, she let him draw her back into his arms, and together they danced.

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They managed five dances before Aleksander could tell that Alina's feet were beginning to tire. Taking her hand in his, he led her off the dancefloor. She leaned against him as they walked, laughing joyously from the adrenaline brought on from dancing.

"Thank you," she said. "For not letting me fall."

"I promised you I wouldn't. And I always keep my promises," he said with a smile. "Are you ready for the next part?"

Her smile dropped fractionally. "I can't say I'm looking forward to having to talk to so many people. But it's a necessary evil, I guess."

"Just follow my lead, and you'll be fine," he said.

"Right." She took his arm when he offered it to her. "The crowd awaits."

Over the next hour, they steadily made their way around the many diplomats and nobles. As the one more experienced with the intricacies of court, he had been prepared to do the majority of the talking. However, it turned out that Alina was a natural. Her easy smiles and effortless charm warmed even the most disagreeable guests.

Aleksander tapped into every ounce of his well-honed patience when it came to talk to the Lantsov's. In the space of a few seconds of conversation Pyotr and Tatiana managed to insult the Little Palace, his Grisha and his soulmate. If it wasn't for a reassuring squeeze of his hand from Alina, he might not have resisted the urge to strike them both down then and there. Carefully laid plans be damned.

Fortunately, he was spared from plotting premature regicide, by the start of the first Grisha demonstration.

Alina pulled him into a quiet corner to watch the performances. With the rest of the crowd distracted by the show, the two of them could catch a quiet moment by themselves.

Taking hold of both of her hands, he placed a gentle kiss on her forehead.

"Just remember," he said. "You're capable of anything."

"I think you're exaggerating," she teased.

"It's not exaggerating if I know it to be true."

She smiled. A sweet indulgent smile just for him. He leaned forward to rest his forehead against hers, hoping to convey all his faith and trust in her through the simple act.

Eventually, the penultimate performance came to an end. The two inferni who had been gracefully throwing a ball of fire back and forth stepped off of the stage. Then it was Alina's turn.

He placed a hand on the small of her back to guide her onto the stage. The crowd fell into an immediate hush at their appearance. A small nod from her told him that she was ready. Secure in that knowledge, he turned to face the many guests.

"Her name is Alina Starkov." His words carried over the captive crowd. "And she will bring liberation to us all."

Shadows poured from his fingertips as he plunged the room into darkness. Once his shadows had settled he stepped to the side, leaving Alina alone on the stage.

This moment was all about her.

The whole room held a collective breath in anticipation. Aleksander's eyes were fixed on Alina, the rest of the room fading into insignificance. In that moment a dragon could have crashed through the ceiling of the Little Palace, and he would have still been unable to avert his gaze from her.

He watched as she raised her hands in front of her. A small surge of pride came to him as he saw that her hands were steady, without even a hint of shakiness. Just as he had taught her, she clasped her hands together, before pulling them apart to reveal a glowing sun.

Gasps echoed around the room. He paid them no mind. With a flick of her wrist, Alina separated the orb into two spheres. They floated over the crowd, spiraling around each other as they cast the entire room in a golden light.

Her eyes found him, even as her hands continued to manipulate the light. He could have fallen to his knees when she looked at him. Standing there, awash in her power, she was the most beautiful sight he had ever seen. He did not know what force in this world had chosen to bind them together. But he knew, deep in his soul, that in every universe, in every version of this world or another, he would find her.

She was his sun, and he was her moon. They were forever caught in each other's orbit. And he was powerless to resist her.

Their eyes were still connected as Alina threw her arms wide, scattering the spheres of light across the entire room. A kaleidoscope of colours illuminated everywhere.

Before Alina had burned her way into his heart, he'd drifted through life seeing only greys and blacks. Watching her now, illuminated in a rainbow of her own creation, he wondered how he'd ever survived the centuries before her.

He was drawn out of his musing by the sounds of whispers and prayers around him.

"Santka Alina," the crowd chanted. Some made the gesture of thanks to the Saints, touching their hand to their forehead, then their chest, then the floor.

Aleksander pushed down at the twinge of annoyance he felt towards the crowd. These fools saw only her for her power. He was the only one who knew her heart. The only one who could worship her in the way she deserved.

Alina stepped down off the stage, reaching for his hand, a wide smile on her face.

"You were magnificent," he said truthfully.

There was a glint in her eye as she looked at him. "Do you think anyone would notice if we slipped away?" Her voice was breathless, an excitement he could not place lying beneath her words.

"I'm sure Marie can manage in your absence," he said, fighting against his throat that suddenly felt like sandpaper.

She tugged at his hand. "Come with me."

He would follow her off the end of the world if she asked it of him.

"Of course," he said, as he let her pull him out of the ballroom.

No one followed them as they strode through the corridors of the Little Palace. Aleksander's heart leaped to his throat when he realised the route she was taking him.

A familiar set of doors appeared before them, and Alina eagerly pushed them open, before pulling him inside the war room. The doors closed with a thud behind them.

At long last, they were alone.

"Alina..." He started to speak, but before he could utter more than her name, her mouth was upon him.

She kissed him with an intensity he had never felt before, and he couldn't help but respond in kind. Her hands reached up to tangle in his hair, sending shivers down the back of his neck. His own hands found her waist, pulling her closer to him, until there was no space at all between them.

There was no breath left in his body. She had stolen it all from him, and yet he refused to pull away.

With a sigh, her lips parted. That was all the permission his tongue needed. She moaned as he deepened the kiss, the sound igniting something within him that he was unable to suppress.

The hands at the nape of his neck pulled slightly, and he reluctantly allowed her to come up for air. She stared up at him like he was something precious, and for a moment he no longer felt like a broken man.

"Aleksander." His name on her lips was a sweet symphony of which he would never tire. "I love you."

His whole body froze. Desperately he searched her eyes for a sign that she was lying.

She held his gaze. There was no deceit in her expression. She was telling the truth.

"You love me," he said, as if he might have misheard.

"Yes, Aleksander. I love you."

He kissed her.

"Alina. My treasure. My heart. My soul." The words tumbled from his lips. "I love you more than I ever thought possible."

He kissed her again. And again. And again.

His desire for her burned underneath his skin.

"I want to have every part of you, Aleksander," she said between kisses.

"I'm yours," he said desperately. "I've always been yours."

“I want you to have every part of me,” she said, and he whined against her lips.

She tilted her neck invitingly, and he eagerly responded. His lips trailed down her neck, mapping every inch of exposed skin. He paused when he reached her pulse point, before hungrily his lips attacked the delicate flesh at her throat. He wanted to mark her, so she would have proof of his devotion for days to come.

“Sasha,” she moaned. The hand in his hair tightened its grip, which only encouraged him further.

Once he was satisfied with the bruise that was beginning to form on her neck, he pulled away.

“Tell me to stop and I’ll stop.” His eyes found hers as he looked for any signs of hesitation.

“Please don’t stop, Sasha,” she said. “I want this. I want *you*. ”

“As my love commands,” he said with a smile. Without pausing, he lifted her into his arms. She clung onto him, her weight reassuring him that she was real. That he wouldn’t wake up tomorrow and find that every moment since Kribirsk had been an exquisite dream.

As he carried her into the bedroom, Aleskander knew two things to be true.

He loved her.

She loved him.

And in that moment, that was all that mattered.

## Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for reading. And thank you for all your lovely comments. They really do make my day!

# Conspiracy

## Chapter Notes

Hi guys! I hope you're all having a great day <3

I vastly overestimated how much I could fit in this chapter, so the chapter count has increased by one to compensate.

I hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Alina did not remember drifting off to sleep, but she must have done so, because when her eyes next blinked open it was dark. The room was quiet. No sounds of music or merriment filtered through the window, meaning the evening's festivities must have come to a close.

She did not care that they had missed the remainder of the Fete. Not when she felt utterly content. She was wrapped securely in Aleksander's arms, their foreheads pressed together. When she shifted slightly she could feel a pleasant ache in her body, and she felt herself blush as she recalled their activities of just a few hours earlier.

She was startled out of her daydreaming by the sound of loud knocking from the war room. Aleksander's body tensed against her as he too was awoken from slumber, disturbed by the sudden noise. She could have laughed at the disgruntled expression that crossed his face, so out of place for the normally perfectly composed general. Clearly he was as unwilling to leave the bed as she was.

The knocking sounded again.

His eyes opened. Noticing that she was awake and watching him, he leaned forward to place a gentle kiss against her lips.

"I'm sure it's nothing," he said. "I'll only be gone a moment."

Alina smiled up at him. "Don't be long."

He shrugged on a robe before making his way out of the bedroom.

Alina snuggled back into the soft sheets as she waited for him to return. From the comfort of the bed she could just about make out the sound of a door opening and a few muffled words. But she was confident that Aleksander could deal with whatever problem had arisen.

She did not have to wait long before he reappeared at the door. The teasing flirtation that she had been prepared to voice died on her tongue as she took in the sight of him.

His entire body was drawn tighter than a bowstring. She sat up immediately as he strode quickly towards her, his eyes darting wildly over her. Two strong hands reached out to grasp her smaller ones. Their grip was tight, as if he was trying to reassure himself that she was solid.

“Aleksander, what’s wrong?” she asked, unable to keep the worry from her voice.

He looked her in the eye, a dangerous mixture of fear and fury battling in his expression.

“There was an attempt on your life,” he said in a measured tone. Although his veneer of calm was betrayed by the slight tremor in his hands. “The assassin went after your body double. We have him in custody.”

Her heart seized in terror. “Marie... is she...?” She couldn’t bring herself to finish the question, her voice barely more than a whisper.

“Genya was able to stabilise her, but her condition is critical,” he said.

One of his hands came up to clutch her face. She leaned into his touch, seeking any ounce of comfort he could provide.

“The healers are with her now.” His eyes glazed over slightly, a familiar reaction that she knew to mean he was lost in thought, trying to think through any eventuality or contingency. “I need to interrogate the perpetrator. Find out if there are any more assassins lying in wait.” His voice hardened. “You’ll stay here. My guards will keep watch.”

“No! You’re not thinking straight, Aleksander,” she said forcefully. He looked startled at her tone, but she continued on. “The safest place for me is with you. Wherever you go, I’m going with you.”

He froze for a moment before sighing, his shoulders dropping imperceptibly.

“You’re right,” he said. “But I have to warn you - this man tried to kill you. He almost killed Marie.” His eyes were cold with fury. If she knew him less it might have scared her, but she knew his anger would never be directed at her. “He will get no mercy from me.”

“Aleksander, I understand what you must do,” she said. “I promise you, this won’t scare me away.”

The hand on her face tightened its grip ever so slightly as he pulled her into a searing kiss. “If anything had happened to you...” His voice broke. “I couldn’t survive it.”

“I’m safe.” She brought her hand up to rest atop the hand on her cheek. “Focus on what’s real. Don’t dwell on your fears.”

He closed his eyes and pressed his forehead against hers. They stayed like that for a moment, the passage of time marked only by the twinned rhythm of their beating hearts.

Eventually he pulled away and turned to get dressed. Alina quickly followed suit. She grabbed her usual black kefta from the wardrobe, ignoring the beautiful, golden kefta that lay

in a heap on the floor along with Aleksander's ceremonial kefta.

She reached out to take his hand once they were both ready, hoping the reminder of her presence would keep his mind from slipping to dark places.

Ivan was waiting for them as they stepped out of the war room. He was not a man who displayed his emotions openly, but the clench of his jaw and cold stare told Alina that he was also simmering with fury underneath his impassive façade.

"Take us to the prisoner," ordered Aleksander.

"Wait," said Alina suddenly. "We need to go to the Healers' wing."

"Why?" asked Aleksander, turning to look at her.

"The prisoner isn't going anywhere." She glanced at Ivan who nodded slightly in acknowledgement. "Marie might not have the luxury of time." Her voice cracked as she spoke.

"Fine," said Aleksander through gritted teeth. "Ivan, return to the prisoner. See if you can find out his motives. We'll meet you shortly."

"Yes, moi soverenyi," said Ivan before he strode away.

Alina gripped Aleksander's hand tightly as they walked through the corridors of the Little Palace. The place felt eerily silent in comparison to the noisy bustle of the Winter Fete.

At last they reached the Healers' wing. Dim lamp light illuminated the room, showing a few Healer's resting in one corner. Alina glanced around before her eyes landed on the single occupied bed.

Laying deathly still against the mattress was Marie. Next to her sat Nadia who was clutching one of her friend's hands tightly.

The Squaller looked up when she heard them approach, her eyes were rimmed red from crying. Alina let go of Aleksander's hand to pull her into a tight hug. Nadia buried her face in Alina's shoulder, fresh tears springing from her eyes, soaking into the black fabric of Alina's kefta.

"How is she?" asked Alina gently.

Nadia's breath hitched as she tried to bring her breathing under control enough to speak. "The Healers think she'll pull through, but we almost lost her."

"I'm so sorry, Nadia," said Alina. "This is all my fault."

"It's not"—Nadia hiccupped—"It's not your fault. Marie wouldn't blame you."

Alina nodded, but Nadia's words could not soothe the guilt that she felt over Marie's injuries. Pulling away from Nadia, she walked over to the bed and grasped Marie's other hand. Her



friend's face was pale against the white sheets, the slight movement of her chest up and down the only indication that she was still alive. Running across her neck was an angry line of raised skin, proof of just how close to death she had come.

"You shouldn't have had to make this sacrifice, Marie," said Alina. "I am forever in your debt."

She stayed for a moment longer, watching the shallow rise and fall of Marie's chest. Then she stood and turned back towards Aleksander who was watching her with razor sharp focus.

"Let's go," she said.

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Aleksander focused on the feel of Alina's hand in his as he led her down into the dungeons.

The ice cold fear that had consumed him when he had heard of the attack had now surged into a raging fury. It was only the warm and steady presence of Alina by his side that kept his shadows at bay.

Genya met them at the entrance to the dungeons. To an outside observer she would have looked no different than usual. But Aleksander knew her well, and beneath the carefully constructed mask of composure, he could see that she was shaken. She pulled Alina into a hug when they reached her. The two women shared a few whispers of reassurance that he could not fully make out.

Once they separated from their embrace, he addressed Genya.

"Has he talked?"

"Nothing truthful," said Genya. "Ivan and Fedyor are with him now."

He nodded in acknowledgement before turning towards Alina. She stared up at him, the tension in her jaw showed just how much these events had frightened her, but even so, there was a fiery determination in her eyes.

"Stay in the shadows," he said. "He doesn't get to lay eyes on you."

Alina didn't argue. Silently, Aleksander called his shadows to surround her, obscuring her from view. She would still be able to see what was happening, but the assassin would not get the privilege of looking upon her.

They turned a corner and the assassin came into view. Aleksander's first impression was that the man looked pitiful. His arms and legs were strapped to a heavy wooden chair, and he was cowering like a rat. Behind him stood Ivan and Fedyor, backs ramrod straight.

Aleksander carefully schooled his expression as he approached. The mask of the Darkling slipped over his skin like a well-worn cloak. The man in the chair baulked when he saw him, and Aleksander did not need to be a Heartrender to detect the quickening on the man's pulse.

“This is a misunderstanding,” stammered the prisoner. “I’ve been set up.”

“I have eye witness statements placing you at the scene of the crime,” said Aleksander. His tone was perfectly neutral in contrast to the other man’s panic.

“It wasn’t me. The ones who did this, I followed them,” said the prisoner.

“Followed whom?”

“There were three of them. From across the fold. From the start they seemed shifty. Suspicious. So when they left our stage at the Fete, I followed them. By the time I walked into that room, they were gone. And Saints, it was...unspeakable.”

Aleksander had heard enough of this fiction. Interrupting the prisoner, he instead addressed Ivan.

“How much of that is true?”

“He did cross the fold with three others,” said Ivan with the hint of a smirk. “The rest were lies.”

“What? No... That’s preposterous,” sputtered the prisoner.

Aleksander resisted the urge to roll his eyes. Again, he ignored the prisoner to speak directly to Ivan.

“Do we have a mark on these three accomplices?”

“One carriage is unaccounted for,” replied Ivan. “And there’s been reports that two priceless vases have gone missing from the Grand Palace.”

Aleksander cared nothing for the trinkets and baubles in the Grand Palace. If the thieves had fled the grounds with their prize, then they would not return. Therefore they were of no consequence to him. He turned back towards the prisoner.

“We keep records of everyone who crosses the fold. For the Winter Fete we had ambassadors from Kerch, Novyi Zem, the Wandering Isle, but you didn’t cross with them, did you?” His words were cold as ice. “No, you and your crew, you have another way.”

“I don’t know what you mean...”

“He does,” interrupted Fedyor.

“I’m an entertainer,” said the prisoner loudly. “Oskar, Oskar Krepkov.”

Aleksander had grown bored of this charade. Languidly, he walked forward until he was looming over the quivering man. His hands gripped the prisoner’s left wrist, uncaring of the pain his punishing grip was inflicting on him. Forcefully, he pulled back the sleeve to reveal the skin underneath. Fifteen white scars marked the man’s flesh. Fifteen trips across the fold.

“Well, that is certainly *entertaining*,” sneered Aleksander. “You are the Conductor, Arken Visser, are you not?”

The prisoner - Visser - ceased his squirming at Aleksander’s words. Confirmation of Aleksander’s claim.

“You steal Grisha out of my palace.” Aleksander’s shout echoed off the stone walls, causing Visser to jump against his restraints. “You smuggle them across the fold and then you sell them as slaves to the highest bidder.”

From behind him he heard the sound of a faint gasp. It was so soft he would not have heard it all, if not for the fact that his subconscious was always tuned perfectly to her. The reminder of her presence made him pause. He knew that her heart was not yet hardened to the world in the way his had been, and his desire not to frighten her overcame his thirst to tear this man limb from limb.

“Answer me this.” Aleksander stared down at Visser as the other man cowered in his chair. “How much did Zlatan offer you for the Sun Summoner’s head?”

Visser raised his chin, choosing to meet Aleksander’s eyes for the first time.

“One million krugge,” said Visser, voice steady. “So, give me half that. I’ll get revenge for you. I can get close to Zlatan.”

Fury, burning hotter than Aleksander had felt in a very long time, surged within him. In his mind he imagined all the slow and painful ways he could put an end to this pitiful man’s existence. But he stayed his hand.

Turning on his heel he stepped into the shadows that surrounded Alina, bringing her into his view. Her eyes were wide, pinpricks of tears at the corners. Carefully, he enveloped both of her hands in his.

“He came here to end your life,” he said, keeping his voice low. “It is your choice what becomes of him.”

Alina closed her eyes and took a steadying breath.

“He would have killed me,” she said shakily. “He almost killed Marie. He enslaves Grisha.”

“Yes,” said Aleksander. He squeezed her hands reassuringly. “Whatever you decide, I will not judge you.”

Her eyes opened. In her gaze he saw uncertainty and fear, yes, but underneath all that there was a glint of steel.

“He deserves to die,” said Alina eventually coldly, but then her voice quivered. “But... make it quick, *please*.”

Aleksander nodded and turned back to face Visser. In less than a heartbeat the cut flew from his hands, severing the man’s head from his body. A far cleaner death than he deserved.

There was a choked shout from Alina. Instantly, Aleksander pulled her into his arms, letting her bury her face against his chest.

“Shh...” he murmured against the crown of her head. “It’s done. He can’t hurt you anymore. He won’t hurt anyone ever again.”

Alina sobbed into his kefta, shock from the gruesome sight overcoming her. He held her close until he could feel her breathing and tears start to slow.

“Come,” he said, pressing a kiss to the top of her head. “Let’s not linger here.”

Positioning his body to block her view of the now deceased prisoner, Aleksander guided Alina out of the dungeons and back into the corridors of the Little Palace. As they walked, he tilted his head back to address Genya, Fedyor and Ivan who were following behind them a few paces back.

“I know the hour is late, but there are things we must discuss.”

The three Corporalki wore matching expressions of grim determination. When they reached the war room, Aleksander pushed the door open, letting the other four step inside before he closed the door securely behind them.

Bathed in the warm candlelight of their chambers, he could see that Alina was exhausted. He wanted nothing more than to carry her to bed, to wrap her in his arms and never let go. But he had a duty to her and to all of his Grisha that he must abide by.

He walked over to the map in the centre of the room and picked up Zlatan’s piece.

“An attack on one Grisha is an attack on all Grisha,” he said. “Zlatan’s actions can no longer be ignored. It is time for us to act.”

Alina’s hand came to rest atop his on the war table.

“You want to destroy the fold?” she asked, voice steady despite her tiredness.

“Yes,” he said. “It is time for Ravka to be reunited. And Zlatan must pay for what he’s done.”

He glanced towards Ivan and Fedyor.

“Ivan, Fedyor, prepare a travelling party. We leave for Kribirsk in three days' time.”

“Yes, moi soverenyi,” they replied in unison.

He looked at Genya. She stood perfectly still, her hands clasped behind her back.

“I think it’s time for the King to fall ill,” he said, knowing she would understand his meaning perfectly.

A hint of a sardonic smile crossed Genya’s face. She may not have suffered first hand by the King, but he knew that she’d heard enough whispers over the years to know exactly what sort

of man Pyotr was.

“Of course, *moi soverenyi*,” she said. She had known this day was coming and now the viper prepared to strike. “It will be done.”

He nodded in acknowledgement. “You’re dismissed.”

The three of them bowed in unison before quickly vacating the war room.

Once they were alone, he indulged in his desire to sweep Alina into his arms. She nestled her face into the crook of his neck as he carried her to bed.

Gently, he placed her against the sheets, before leaning down to unlace her boots. He removed his own boots and shrugged off his *kefta*. She allowed him to remove her *kefta* as well. Then finally he could crawl into bed alongside her.

His arms enveloped her. The weight of her body pressed against his soothed his racing heart slightly. The fear that had gripped him ever since he had first been told of the attack still roiled like waves under his skin.

He allowed himself to hold her. He focused on the sound of her breathing, the smell of lavender in her hair, the rhythm of her beating heart. The fear did not subside fully, but it did retreat somewhat.

“Does it ever get any easier?” Alina’s voice was barely above a whisper. “Watching people die.”

Aleksander sighed. “Not for a very long time,” he said softly. “But a heart can only take so much sorrow, and eventually you’ll learn to save your tears for those who deserve them.”

She was quiet for a long moment. He wished he could read her mind, so that he could banish all her worries and she would never feel fear again.

“What if I can’t bring down the fold?” she said eventually.

“You can,” he said with conviction. Although even without seeing her face, he could tell that she did not believe him.

“Alina.” He waited for her chin to tilt upwards so that their eyes could meet. “When I created the fold it was fuelled by anger.” The sight of the bodies of those he had sworn to protect still haunted him. “You’ve never let yourself be consumed by anger. In that respect you are so much stronger than I have ever been. Your love. *Our* love. It will be enough to tear down the fold. I promise.”

Alina’s eyes were shiny with unshed tears. But unlike earlier, he knew that these weren’t tears of shock or terror.

“I love you,” she said.

Aleksander knew that for the rest of his existence, there would never be a sound more beautiful than her voice saying those three words.

“I love you too,” he said in return. “If you had been hurt tonight. If I had lost you...” He inhaled a shaky breath. Involuntarily, the image of Alina covered in blood flashed into his mind. “I could not bear to live in a world without you in it.”

Her arms wrapped around his back, pulling him tight against her.

“I’m here,” she reassured him. “I’m not going anywhere.”

Her lips brushed against his lightly. He let his eyes close, his fear fading away like waves receding on a shore.

For now, she was safe in his arms, and with that knowledge he finally let himself drift off to sleep.

## Chapter End Notes

A few notes on this chapter:

1. Genya was never gifted to the Queen, so growing up she had a lot more time to devote to her studies. She's also frequently behind enemy lines on missions. Hence why her healing is more advanced than in canon and she was able to save Marie.
2. Kaz took one look at the way Aleks and Alina were clinging to each other at the Fete and aborted his plan. The crows took the most valuable looking things they could find the Grand Palace and then disappeared into the night.
3. This chapter is the first time Alina has ever seen the cut. That's not really relevant to the plot, I just thought it was interesting.

I love each and every one of you who reads this fic. Thank you so much for your incredible support!

# Faith

## Chapter Notes

Strap in for drama folks!

We've got just one more chapter to go after this. The end is in sight!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tension was thick in the air of the Little Palace as Alina and Aleksander prepared for their trip to the fold. Word of the attempt on Alina's life and Marie's injuries having spread rapidly through the ranks of Grisha.

*An attack on one Grisha is an attack on all Grisha* is what Aleksander had said, and the whole palace seemed to abide by that philosophy. Overnight the whole mood of the palace shifted. Whereas before Alina was treated with a mixture of curiosity and distant respect, now there was a fierce air of protectiveness in the eyes of everyone that she saw.

Although, no one could ever be more protective than Aleksander. He barely let Alina out of his sight in the days leading up to their departure. And more often than not he would find some way to touch her. Clutching her hand in his. A solid hand on the small of her back. Her wrapped in his arms as they slept fitfully. The attack had clearly shaken him, and she only hoped that having her close by would soothe some of his fears.

The evening before their procession was set to leave for the fold, they received word from the Grand Palace. A terrible pox had infected the King, as well as the Queen, the Crown Prince, and the Apparat.

Alina was proud to say that she didn't flinch when the messenger delivered the news. *This was necessary*, she told herself. And the lives of the King and Queen were not worth more than the lives of the thousands of soldiers who were dying in the King's wars. It shocked her a little, just how much her outlook had changed in just a few short months, but she could not regret the part that she played in all this.

The journey to the fold was just as tense as the preceding few days had been. Alina and Aleksander travelled by carriage, surrounded by over a hundred Grisha and Oprinchniki. She spent most of the carriage journey pressed up against his side, staring out as the Ravkan countryside rolled by.

Eventually, the fold came into view. The great looming mass of shadows looked even larger than before, but she found that she wasn't gripped by fear in the same way as when she first saw it.

She knew what it was. She knew how it came into being. And she was here to destroy it.

This was her destiny.

The morning that they had been preparing for dawned bright and clear, or at least, as bright and clear as it could be so close to the fold. She awoke to find Aleksander already watching her, deep in contemplation.

She pulled him into a deep kiss, hoping to banish his dark thoughts with the taste of her lips. He eagerly kissed back.

The kiss was long and slow, and in it she tried to impart all her love, her devotion, her faith for him. Words were unnecessary and she knew that he understood her meaning perfectly.

Aleksander helped her get dressed, adorning her body in gold. She knew the significance of the clothes she wore. She was to be a symbol, a beacon of hope for Ravka, and it was important that she looked the part.

Once she was fully dressed, she helped him into his kefta. Her hands lingering on the golden embroidery that adorned his shoulders. He kissed her again, their connection flaring to life through the touch. Then he offered her his hand, and together they stepped out to greet the day.

Side by side they walked through the camp towards the awaiting skiff. Her knuckles were white as she gripped his hand, but she kept her head high. Today she could not afford to appear weak in front of anyone apart from her soulmate.

All through the camp she could hear shouts and prayers of *Sankta Alina* and *Sol Koroleva* ! She only hoped that after today she might be able to live up to her titles.

Once they took their position at the bow of the skiff, Aleksander turned to her.

“Are you ready?” he asked, dark eyes meeting her own. His question was sincere.

“Yes,” she said. For how could she doubt herself, when he was standing here by her side?

He squeezed her hand in reassurance. The power of his call surged within her, entwining with the power gifted to her by Morozova’s stag. Underneath her skin she could feel her light as it danced in anticipation, begging to be let out.

Aleksander gave a nod of affirmation to Zoya, who was manning the main sail. The skiff jolted slightly, and then they were moving.

Closer and closer came the fold. The twisting darkness seemed to stare straight at her, peering into her soul, but she stood firm.

Raising her hand forward, she called forward her power. Golden sunlight spread from her fingertips, enveloping the skiff in a dome of light as they reached the edge of the fold.

The darkness parted in front of them, flowing around her light like waves in the ocean breaking against a rock. The skiff continued forward, moving deeper into the fold, until finally they were entirely surrounded by shadows.



Next to her, she felt Aleksander freeze. His eyes were locked forward, but they were unfocused, as he was trapped in the nightmare of his memories.

“Aleksander.” She spoke his name softly, seeking to draw him out of his torment. He glanced towards her immediately, eyes bright with tears. “Stay with me. We can get through this. Together.”

He nodded before inhaling a steady breath. Pride swelled within her as she watched the fear fade from his eyes replaced by determination.

Volcra circled overhead as they made their way through the fold. Their shrieks had been the music of her nightmares, but here and now she was not afraid of them. The creatures would not be able to touch her as long as her light held strong, and she would not let it fail her.

As the skiff continued onward, she began to feel a tug on her chest. It started off weak, but strengthened the further in they travelled. It felt different to the tether she knew connected her to Aleksander. It felt like a lead weight on a rope, dragging her further into the murky depths of the fold.

At last they came across the crumbling steps of an abandoned church. The pull tried to wrench her forward, and she might have stumbled if it weren't for the reassuring support of Aleksander's hand in hers. She looked up at him and saw anguish and familiarity in his eyes.

“Is this the place?” she asked.

“Yes,” he replied, voice hard as steel.

This was where the fold began.

Aleksander raised his fist, gesturing for the skiff to come to a stop. He turned to speak to the rest of the crew.

“Whatever happens, you are to stay on the skiff.” He spoke with the surety of a man who had lived for centuries. “Nobody is to interfere in what is about to happen.”

There was a nod of acknowledgement from the assembled Grisha, although some faces looked decidedly uncertain at the order. Alina looked around at the faces of her friends. She hoped this would not be the last time she looked upon them.

Aleksander helped her off of the skiff. As they approached the base of the stone steps, she expanded the dome of light, ensuring her friends would remain encased in its protection.

Turning to face Aleksander, she took hold of both of his hands. Just as she had done on their first night together, she stretched upwards to brush a soft kiss against his lips.

“I love you,” she whispered, needing him to hear the words. “Whatever happens, know that I love you.”

“I love you,” he whispered back. Those three words held more power over her than fear ever could.

She took a deep breath. She felt the power within her, the power that she'd always had as well as the power that had been freely given to her. Then she gathered it all up and *pushed*.

Sunlight exploded out from her. Her entire body glowing white as she unleashed the full extent of her power. The light was so bright it was blinding, but Aleksander did not look away. He kept his eyes locked in her gaze, staring at her with all of the love that she knew his heart to possess.

Unconsciously, she could feel her light as it rushed out of her. It reached for miles, racing over the deadened land of the fold. And everywhere her light touched, she felt the darkness and shadows begin to give way.

Her hands trembled with exertion as she stretched her power farther and farther. The effort it took was overwhelming, but the feel of Aleksander's hands in hers grounded her. She prayed that her power would not abandon her before the fold could be fully destroyed.

It had to be enough. It *would* be enough.

Her knuckles were white with exertion as she gripped Aleksander's hands. The strength with which she clung to him was so forceful that it must be hurting him, but he made no moves to pull away.

Her world narrowed as she fought to stay in control. Her light and the feel of Aleksander's hand were the only two things she was aware of. But then, all of a sudden, something else captured her attention, as the voice of a ghost drifted through her mind.

*I will make this world safe for Grisha.*

Her heart seized as she realised that it was Aleksander's voice that she could hear. But it wasn't the man in front of her who was speaking, instead she was hearing the words of the man he once was. The broken man who had created the fold over four hundred years.

Tears welled in her eyes. She could feel Aleksander's anguish as if it were her own. His desperation. His fear. His fury. It threatened to consume her.

*I will make this world safe for you.*

Her light burned hotter as she struggled against the onslaught of grief. A searing pain began to burn deep within her. She failed to suppress her gasp as it started to overwhelm her. The pain was too much. She wasn't strong enough to withstand it.

Her knees gave way. But, before she could crumple to the ground, strong arms wrapped around her middle. Supporting her. Keeping her from falling.

*I will make it so you will never be hunted for who you are.*

"You're doing so well, milaya," she heard Aleksander say. He kissed the tears from her cheeks. "Give your pain to me. Let me share it with you."

She pressed her forehead to his. He didn't flinch even though her skin was blisteringly hot. The pain receded slightly as he allowed it to flow through into his body. With him sharing the burden, the pain was not so all-consuming and she felt her breathing start to come back under her control.

Bracing herself, she redoubled her effort. Her light reached even further, spreading almost to the edges of the fold.

*I will make an army strong enough to protect you.*

"I'm here," she shouted. Whether she was speaking to the Aleksander in front of her, or the Aleksander of four hundred years ago, she could not say. All that she knew was that she needed him to hear her. "I'm sorry you had to wait so long. But I'm here now and I'm never letting you go."

She was almost there. Tears blurred her vision so much she could hardly even make out Aleksander's face in front of her.

With the last of her energy, she screamed.

She screamed for every Grisha who had ever had to live in fear for the gifts they were born with.

She screamed for the man she loved. Who had held the weight of the world on his shoulders for so long that he had forgotten how it felt to live a life unburdened.

She screamed for the world that needed remaking. A world that they would reforge into a sanctuary that would keep their people safe.

*I promise, my love.*

With one final scream, the world went white.

The light was too bright, even for her. She collapsed to the ground along with Aleksander, as not even his strength could keep her upright any longer. Her power ceased flowing out of her, as there was nothing left for her to give.

The gentle caress of unconsciousness came over her, and then she knew no more.

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The world returned to her slowly, in fragments.

The pain was gone. She was lying on sand with the weight of something heavy on top of her. Somewhere in the distance she could hear the sound of birdsong.

It could have been a few seconds since she lost consciousness, or it could have been hours. It was impossible for her to say. She opened her eyes, expecting to see the endless black of the fold, but instead she saw blue.

The midday sky stretched above her. The sun cast its golden rays upon her skin and with its warmth she could feel her strength returning.

On top of her, Aleksander groaned as he too returned to consciousness. He lay with his head against her heart. His eyes blinked open slowly, his furrowed brow softening as he saw her watching him.

He opened his mouth to say something, but then he stopped as his eyes trailed past her to the vast expanse of sky.

She watched as he gazed upwards, taking in the sun that was beaming down at them from where it hung among the stars. He looked around at the land that was formerly encompassed by the fold, illuminated with sunlight for the first time in centuries.

“It’s gone. It’s really gone.” His voice was full of wonder and disbelief in equal measure. “You did it.”

“ *We* did it,” she said, smiling brightly.

“We did it,” he laughed. She had never seen such joy in his expression.

He surged forward, capturing her lips in a searing kiss. She kissed him back, pouring all of her relief into their connection. His laughter tasted like honey on his lips and she found herself laughing as well.

He pulled away from her slightly, his hands clutching at her face. The centuries seemed to melt off of his face, replaced with a lightness that she had never seen in his eyes before.

“I love you,” he said.

He kissed her.

“I love you.”

He kissed her again.

“I love you.”

He kissed her again.

She smiled against his lips. One of her hands came up to rest on his cheek, wiping away the tears of joy that had sprung from his eyes. There was sand in her hair and her kefta was no doubt filthy with dust but she did not care. They laughed together in joy at what they had achieved.

Eventually, he pushed himself to his feet. Gratefully, she took his hand when he offered it to her. With a tug, he pulled her upright and into his arms. His hands settled around her waist and her head nestled on his shoulder. Neither of them willing to let the other go just yet.

They held each other for a long moment before she finally pulled away and turned back towards the skiff. Taking hold of Aleksander's hand once more, she led him back towards the boat.

As soon as they came close she heard a great cheer from the skiff. The Grisha were all gathered near the railings staring wide-eyed as Alina and Aleksander approached. Several of her friends had obviously been crying. There were still tears streaming down Fedyor's face as he beamed down at them from his spot beside Ivan. It even looked like Ivan's eyes might be slightly red as well, although she knew that the Heartrender would deny it fervently.

Aleksander took the opportunity to brush the sand from his kefta before he climbed on board the skiff. Alina would have done the same, but before she got the chance she found herself being swept into a hug by Zoya of all people. A moment of shock passed before Alina returned the hug. Zoya embraced her for a second before pulling away, averting her eyes as if in embarrassment.

"How long were we gone?" asked Aleksander. His usual unflappable composure once more in place as he surveyed the skiff.

"About an hour," replied Fedyor. "We were debating sending someone to find you when we saw you return."

Aleksander nodded in acknowledgement.

"The fold is gone," he said, and she was proud to hear that his voice did not shake even though she knew how much it meant to him to be able to say those words. "But today's work is not yet done. We will continue onwards to Novokribirsk where we will make Zlatan answer for the crimes he has committed against our people. Against Ravka."

The other Grisha rushed back to their positions once Aleksander had given his orders. It was not long before the skiff was once more under way.

She squeezed his hand. "We do this together," she said.

"Together," he agreed.

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Miles of sand stretched around them. The skiff made good progress on its way to Novokribirsk. The trip having been made immeasurably easier by the lack of volcra circling above. The wretched creatures had all been reduced to ash by Alina's light. He was glad to hear their screams finally silenced. A quick death the only mercy he could give those that he had doomed to such a tortuous existence.

For the first time, he could cast his eyes upon the true devastation that he had wrought on the land. In every direction he could see nothing but ashen sand. However, already new life was beginning to take over, as a few curious birds could be seen flying above. A glimmer of hope sparked in his chest as he imagined the possibility of life returning to the fold.

Beside him, Alina stood with her head held high and her back straight. There was no trace in her expression of the exertion that she had put herself through in the process of destroying the fold. In fact her eyes were bright and clear, and her face held an easy smile.

He disliked having to damper her spirits with caution, but they could not afford to underestimate Zlatan.

“Make sure you stay alert for trouble when we reach Novokribirsk,” he said. “It is unlikely that Zlatan will come quietly.”

She glanced towards him and nodded, an edge of steel appearing in her eyes.

The skiff continued onwards and it was not long before the buildings and factories of Novokribirsk came into view. Even from a fair distance, it was difficult to miss the huge mass of noise that radiated from the city. As they drew closer he could see hundreds if not thousands of people gathered in the streets. It was impossible to make out individual voices or chants from this distance but he did not need ears to be able to guess what they were saying.

*Sol Koroleva.*

*Sun Queen.*

At last the skiff reached the edge of the land that had formerly been covered by the fold. The position only marked by the changing colour of the sand - from ashen grey, to sun-bleached white.

The streets of Novokribirsk were packed with people. Many were on their knees in prayer, while others waved hastily painted banners displaying the insignia of a blazing sun. However it was not the masses that currently held Aleksander's attention, that honour was reserved for the nervous looking general waiting impatiently on the wooden dry docks in front of them.

Zlatan's face may have been schooled into a mask of impassiveness, but it was clear from the whites of knuckles and the agitated tapping of his foot that he was furious. *Good*, thought Aleksander. He was going to enjoy this immensely.

As previously instructed, Zoya brought the skiff to a stop a few dozen paces from the edge of the dock. Taking Alina's hand in his, he guided her up to the very front of the skiff. A great roar came from the crowd when she came into view.

She kept hold of his hand tightly, but that was the only indication of her nerves. Instead, like the Queen she was always meant to be, she greeted her subjects with a wave and a smile. Her skin took on an otherworldly glow as she allowed her powers to seep through. It was only a taste of her powers, but it marked her unmistakably as the Sun Summoner.

The people of Novokribirsk were enraptured by her presence, just as they should be. She raised her hand, and in an instance a hush fell over the crowd. She inhaled a large breath to steady herself, and he squeezed her hand in reassurance.

“The fold is gone.” Her voice carried easily over the crowd as they stared at her in awed silence. “I ask that we put aside our differences. It is long past time for our country to be reunited. No East or West, just Ravka.”

“Ravka!” shouted the crowd in unison. “Sol Koroleva!”

Aleksander leaned in close to Alina, who was still watching the chanting crowd with wide eyes. No words were exchanged between the two of them, but he placed his hand gently on her arm. A message - *be ready*. She tensed slightly, her head dipping the tiniest fraction in a nod.

Aleksander kept his eyes trained closely on Zlatan. He watched as the First-Army general grew more and more agitated. It was clear that support for the West’s secession had plummeted in the wake of the fold’s destruction, but that did not mean that the man would abandon all of his plans. Aleksander watched patiently as he waited for Zlatan to make his play.

He did not have to wait for long.

Zlatan whispered something furiously in the ear of the man who stood next to him. An expression of confusion and disbelief crossed the other man’s face, before he shook his head in denial of whatever order Zlatan had given him. It was at that moment that Zlatan’s patience seemed to snap. With a monstrous yell he raised his fist, an obvious signal to his few remaining supporters.

A thunderous boom echoed across the packed plaza, as several canons that had been concealed on rooftops suddenly fired directly at the bow of the skiff.

Aleksander and Alina were prepared for the attack. They moved as one. Working perfectly in unison they each raised a hand, palms facing outwards, to summon a huge dome of swirling light and shadow that encompassed the skiff. An impenetrable shield. The bombs crashed into the dome, exploding in a blaze of sparks that cascaded harmlessly around the two of them.

There was a mass cry of terror from the crowd as they witnessed the assault on their Sun Saint. Through the shield of dancing light and shade, Aleksander could see Zlatan’s face twist into a snarl of fury as he yelled out in anger.

“The West will never bow to the likes of you.” Zlatan’s words carried over the shocked crowd. “You are an abomination.”

A small curl of pleasure settled in Aleksander’s stomach - Zlatan’s ill-advised assault had given him the perfect justification for retaliation. Aleksander drew his shadows to his hands, prepared to strike Zlatan down just as he deserved. However, before the cut had finished forming in Aleksander’s hands there was a joint roar from the assembled crowd.

It seemed the public of Novokribirsk objected to the attack on their beloved Sankta, because at once their mood transformed into an enraged mob. People swarmed onto the docks, grabbing Zlatan with furious hands before the general could even react. Aleksander watched

as Zlatan disappeared into the crowd, dragged kicking and screaming to his doom. Beside him, Alina did not even flinch as Zlatan met a bloody demise.

It was all over in less than a minute. The crowd parted once their blood-lust had been sated, leaving Zlatan's corpse lying cold on the floor of the docks. Aleksander cast his eyes carefully over the crowd, looking for any reaction from Zlatan's remaining supporters. However, it seemed with their leader dead, the fires of resistance had burned out. No more West Ravkan soldiers made a move to strike out against them.

The mob dispersed back into the crowd, the mood of the plaza cooling from fury back into reverence. The danger now passed, Aleksander and Alina let their shield fade, putting them back in full view of the crowd.

Aleksander raised his voice.

"It is time for the dawn of a new age for a united Ravka." He lifted their intertwined hands in a show of triumph. "The Lantsovs are dead," he declared. "Long live the Queen!"

Alina's voice rang out from beside him. "Long live the King!"

"Long live the Queen! Long live the King!" came the thunderous reply from the masses before them.

As the crowd chanted, Aleksander turned back towards Alina. A ray of sunlight shone down from the clear blue sky. The light caught in her hair, illuminating her face in a golden halo. A golden crown.

He smiled. What the future held for the two of them he could not say. But he knew in his heart that whatever challenges they would face, they would face them together.

The age of Grisha had begun.

## Chapter End Notes

I also posted a oneshot for the Darklina discord server's Mythology and Folklore month. It's inspired by the fairy tale Snow White. You can find it on my profile page if you want to check it out!



# Tomorrows

## Chapter Notes

We made it to the end! I promise that all of the angst is done. This final chapter is just pure tooth-rotting fluff.

I hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The morning's sun gentle light filtered in through the bedroom window, warming Alina's skin as she awoke from slumber. Her eyes blinked open lazily, still shaking off the haze of a pleasant night's sleep. She was cocooned in the black sheets, one of her arms slung around Aleksander's waist, their legs tangled together. Even in sleep they did not wish to be apart from one another.

Aleksander came into focus slowly as her eyes adjusted to the morning light, their faces merely inches from each other. She was not surprised to find him already awake and watching her. It was a habit it seemed he would never tire of, not that she minded in the slightest.

"Good morning, milaya," he said. Leaning forward to brush his lips against her in greeting.

She smiled into the kiss. "Good morning, Sasha."

They lay there for a long while. Both content to bask in the serenity of the morning stillness, before they would be forced to rise and deal with whatever challenges the day would present.

Aleksander was the first one to break the tranquillity as he kissed her again before pushing the covers off of himself and standing up. She whined and reached out to try and stop him. The only response she received was a chuckle as he extracted herself from her grip.

"As much as I'd love to stay in bed all day with you, there are some things I must attend to," he said with a smile.

In response, she schooled her face into her best pout to try and convince him. "Who organised a meeting so early in the day?" she asked begrudgingly.

"It's not important," he said as he dressed. "I'll see you later, my love."

He bent down to lay a kiss to her forehead, brushing a stray lock of hair behind her ear as he did so. Then he turned and left, but not before casting one lingering look back at where she still lay tangled among the sheets.

Alina sighed and pulled the covers back up to her chin. In a short while she would need to get up and face the day, but for now she was content to steal an extra few minutes in bed.

It had been almost a month since they had successfully torn down the fold. They were now rulers in all but name, but it transpired that coronations took time to plan so it was still a few weeks before they would be named King and Queen officially. Although their lack of official titles did not stop the responsibilities that came with ruling a nation. She had learned more about statecraft and politics in the last few weeks than she had in her whole life before now.

She sighed as she contemplated getting up. However, without Aleksander's body heat, the bed soon began to cool to a less pleasant temperature. So reluctantly Alina pushed herself out of bed. She padded over to the wardrobe where her keftas hung neatly next to Aleksander's. For public appearances she now had a selection of golden keftas, but she still preferred her black keftas for days when she could stay within the walls of the Little Palace.

She picked out one such kefta and shrugged it on, wondering idly if she would be able to convince Aleksander to acquire a few golden keftas of his own. As nicely as black suited him, she couldn't help but think that he would look very handsome dressed head to toe in gold.

Once dressed, she considered what she needed to get done today. Her first meeting would not start for another hour or so, but in the meantime there *was* something that she could do.

Carefully, she made her way to the Fabricators' workshop, keeping one eye out for a familiar black kefta as she did so. Hopefully Aleksander's meetings would keep him occupied for a bit longer and she could complete her task without him finding out. Luck was on her side as the hallways were blessedly empty this early in the morning so she managed to make it all the way to her destination without encountering anyone.

The door to David's workshop was shut. She raised her hand in preparation to knock, but before her hand could make contact with the heavy door it swung open.

"Thank you again, David. This is truly some of your best work."

Alina had no time to react to the sound of Aleksander's voice. His head was turned away from her, looking back into the workshop, so he did not see her as he stepped through the doorway and straight into her. They collided with a thud.

"Alina!" said Aleksander, startled. He took a small step away from her. His hands moved to clasp firmly behind his back.

"Aleksander." Alina was grateful there were no Heartrenders nearby to detect her racing pulse. She fought to keep her face and voice calm. "What are you doing here?"

"I was just checking in with David on how the railroad project is going," he said quickly. "Yourself?"

She wracked her brain for a lie. "Oh, I was looking for Genya. Someone said she might be down here."

He nodded. "Well, I wish you luck in your search. I'll just be off then."

Before she could respond, he leant down and pressed a quick kiss to her cheek. Then he strode past her down the corridor. His right hand was clenched in a fist by his side as he walked.

She waited until he rounded a corner and was fully out of view, before she released the breath that she had been holding. David cleared his throat awkwardly from where he was standing inside his workshop.

"Genya's in meetings at the Grand Palace today," he said in his usual matter-of-fact tone.

"I know, I just needed an excuse so he wouldn't ask questions," she said as she took a step inside the room. The door shut with a click behind her. "You said it was ready?" she asked eagerly.

"Yes. I finished it three days ago," said David, not needing to ask what she was referring to.

She watched as he walked over to a lockbox that was set on one of the many shelves that lined the walls of the workshop. With a wave of his hand the box clicked open, and he reached inside to pull out a small object.

"Despite its appearance, it is made out of solid gold. The outside is plated with an alloy to give it the colour you specified. I made sure it won't scratch or tarnish, no matter what happens to it," he said as he walked back across the room. Once he was standing in front of her he placed the object into her outstretched palm.

Alina stared at the ring that sat delicately in her hand.

The outside of the band was a deep black. The metal was shiny enough for her to make out her reflection, reminding her of the way the light often caught in Aleksander's eyes. In contrast to the outside, the inside of the band was a bright gold, engraved with a blazing sun. She felt a small curl of pleasure at the idea that he would always carry a piece of her with him.

"It's perfect, David," she said honestly. "Thank you so much."

David did not respond verbally to the praise, but he inclined his head in a nod of acknowledgement. Then he turned back towards his workbench, picking up some kind of metal contraption and inspecting it.

She knew him well enough to know when she was being dismissed. "Thank you, again," she called to him, before turning and leaving the workshop.

Carefully, she slipped the ring into an interior pocket of her kefta. It sat there, just above her heart.

Now she just needed to find a way to ask him the question.

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Aleksander sat at his desk, inspecting the ring that he had collected from David that morning.

It was made out of pure gold, the outside free from embellishments. He would have adorned it entirely in diamonds if he thought it would make Alina happy. But he knew that she preferred elegance and simplicity to opulence. So instead he had settled for adorning the inside of the band with the engraving of a moon in eclipse. *His symbol.*

Logically, he knew it was ridiculous to feel nervous. She was his soulmate. And even more than that, he knew that she had already entrusted him with the most sacred of gifts - her heart. Marriage was merely a formality at this point. But knowing that did not stop the fluttering of his beating heart as he contemplated asking her the question.

He had almost blurted it out this morning, when he had bumped into her outside David's workshop. Fortunately he had managed to compose himself before his mouth ran away from him.

It had been a surprise to see her near the Durast's workshop. She normally took every chance to linger in bed, which was why he thought he had time to visit David without her knowing. At least it had seemed that she had not guessed the true reason for his visit.

He turned the ring over in his fingers. Now that he had it in his possession he found that he was uncharacteristically impatient. It was strange to think that he had waited over five-hundred years to meet her, and now the idea of waiting even a week to ask her to marry him was maddening.

*Tomorrow*, he decided. The few meetings that they had planned could be rescheduled, and then he would have all day to ask her.

*Tomorrow will be the day.*

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Tomorrow was in fact *not* the day.

The day had at least started well. Alina had looked particularly beautiful in the soft morning glow when they had awoken. He was tempted to ask her there and then, but she caught him off guard with a searing kiss. The taste of her lips proved to be very distracting, and it was much later that the two of them finally left the comforts and pleasures of their bed.

"Come riding with me?" he asked, once he slipped on his kefta. Subtly checking the pocket for the ring as he did so.

"Of course," she agreed with a smile.

Everything was going according to his plan. They would ride out together to somewhere secluded, romantic. Where there would be no distractions to prevent him from baring his nervous heart to her.

They had almost made it to the doors of the Little Palace when his perfectly laid plans were dashed by the arrival of a frantic Genya.

"Moi tsar, moya tsaritsa, you're needed urgently in the Grand Palace," said Genya, slightly out of breath.

"What is it?" he replied sharply, his good mood already souring.

"The ambassador from Kerch is claiming that General Turgenev offered him insult. He's threatening to withdraw the proposed trade agreement as a result," she said.

A hot flare of irritation surged within Aleksander. *Curse idiotic First Army Generals who don't know when to keep their mouth shut.* He was in half a mind to demand that Genya deal with it, regardless of the consequences of the agreement falling through. However before he could make such an ill-advised decision, he felt the calming touch of Alina's hand on his arm.

"We'll be right there," said Alina before turning towards him. "We can still go riding once this has been dealt with."

He sighed because he knew she was right.

*Later, he said to himself, the chance to ask her will come later.*

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*Later* ended up being more than three hours gone.

The ambassador had been incensed by the perceived slight, and it had taken many extra rounds of negotiations before he consented that the trade agreement could still proceed. It had been a frustrating delay, but at least now the day could proceed as planned. Or so Aleksander had thought.

They made it as far as the stables this time before they were interrupted by Fedyor, who had come running from the East Wing of the Little Palace.

"Sir!" said Fedyor, panting from exertion. "There's been an incident in the nursery."

This time, Aleksander did not need to be told twice. However much he cared for his plans with Alina, the safety of the Grisha children under his care was more important. He took off running, Alina and Fedyor falling into step beside him.

"Tell me what happened?" asked Aleksander as they made their way quickly to the nursery.

"Two of the youngest Inferni got into an argument. It got heated," said Fedyor.

"Injuries?"

"Still being assessed. At least three nursemaids have suffered minor burns."

At this point they had rounded into the nursery wing, which was in veritable chaos. Several Tidemakers were already on hand to put out the remaining fires. The room of the incident had not seemed to suffer too much structural damage, but it was nonetheless charred and inhospitable.

A couple of Healers were starting to deal with those injured, which blessedly did not seem to include any of the young ones. The few uninjured nursemaids were desperately trying to round up all of the clearly distressed children.

Without hesitation, Aleksander took control of the scene.

“Fedyor, summon any Healers that are present in the Little Palace. I want everyone who was present at the time of the incident checked for burns or other injuries.”

He turned to address the head nursemaid, who was not among those injured. “Olga, where are the youngest children?”

“They’re safe,” she said. “The baby room was not damaged in the blast. Irina and Yulia are with them.”

He nodded. “We’ll take the children to the dining room. There is enough space there for everyone to wait while the wing is repaired.”

Somehow they managed to shepherd all of the children away from the still smouldering nursery wing and into the dining room. With so many nursemaids temporarily out of commission Alina decided that the two of them would help watch the children while the Durasts worked on repairing the damaged nursery.

Several hours later, after two games of hide-and-seek, three squabbling matches that needed breaking up, and one very successful story time complete with shadow and light puppets, the children were finally returned safe and sound to their newly refurbished nursery. The sun had already set by the time the two of them managed to extract themselves from the tiny children.

“I guess riding will have to wait for another day,” said Alina as they made their way back to their chambers.

Aleksander hummed in agreement, although his mind was still focused on the ring kept securely in his kefta pocket. His plans for today might have been thwarted, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t still ask her the question. As long as there were no more interruptions, everything could still work out.

The door to the war room had barely shut behind him before Alina’s lips were upon him. It only took a moment for him to get over his surprise before he was eagerly kissing back.

“I’ve been waiting to do that all day,” sighed Alina happily.

He leaned down to kiss her one more time, before he pulled away. *This was it*, he thought, *I finally have a moment to ask her.*

“Alina, I...”

*Knock. Knock. Knock.*

Aleksander almost snarled at the untimely interruption. Alina chuckled lightly at his thunderous expression before giving him a quick peck on the lips.

“Foiled again,” she said. When he made no move to answer the door, she swatted him lightly on the arm with a smile. “You better answer that, it might be important.”

Detaching himself from her embrace, he stalked over to the door. The force with which he yanked it open might have struck Ivan, if not for the man’s quick reflexes. The Heartrender opened his mouth to speak, but before he could make a sound Aleksander interrupted him.

“Ivan, I will give you and Fedyor personal leave for a month if you ensure that Alina and I are not disturbed for the rest of the night,” he said sharply.

Ivan’s eyes widened slightly - Aleksander had never permitted his right-hand man to take such a long leave of absence before.

“Now, are you sure you need my attention?” asked Aleksander, voice steady.

Ivan gulped, clearly weighing up his options before speaking. “No, moi tsar. I can handle it.”

“Good,” said Aleksander, before closing the door and locking it for good measure.

His anger cooled as he walked back across the room, replaced by the nerves that had plagued him since he had picked up the ring from David.

Alina had taken the opportunity to pour two glasses of kvas by the time he rejoined her by the table. He eagerly took a glass when she offered it to him. The liquid was bitter, but it soothed his throat which was feeling unusually dry all of a sudden.

One of her hands came to rest on top of his, the touch distracting him from the *thump, thump, thump* of his racing heart. He inhaled a steadying breath before he spoke, focusing on the calming feel of her hand touching his.

“Alina, I don’t think I’ll ever be able to express just how much you have changed my life,” he said honestly.

She smiled up at him in that easy, effortless way that he loved so much. With one hand, he pushed up the right sleeve of his kefta, exposing the black numbers that were now and forever a permanent reminder of his love for her.

“For centuries, I waited and waited for these numbers to reach zero. I thought I had planned for every eventuality, every possibility. And then you blazed into my life on that day in Kribirsk, and I realised that nothing I could have ever done would have prepared me to meet you.” He took hold of her hand, squeezing it tightly as tears began to swell in his eyes.

“I don’t think I’ll ever feel like I’m the man you deserve. Because you deserve the world, and the moon and the stars as well. But I promise, my love, that I will spend the rest of my life trying to be someone who is worthy of you.”

Alina's eyes were misty with her own tears as she listened to him. Her hand that was not currently intertwined with his hand reached into a pocket of her kefta.

"I love you so much," he said. "And what I'm trying to say... What I'm trying to ask..." The words caught in his throat, unable to be voiced. He glanced down at his trembling hands, as they reached down to grasp at the ring that he had carried with him all day.

"Aleksander..." he looked up immediately at the sound of his name on her lips. It took him a moment to realise what he was seeing. She was staring at him, eyes bright with tears.

And in her hand, she held a ring.

"Will you marry me," she asked, voice hopeful, without even a trace of uncertainty.

"Yes," he sobbed, his words suddenly returned to him. "Yes, of course I'll marry you. Will you marry *me*?" he asked, presenting his own ring to her.

"Yes," she laughed, with a smile so wide it could illuminate the whole sky.

The ring fit perfectly on her finger, just as he knew it would. He raised her hand to his lips, kissing it just as he had done when they had first met.

She slid her ring onto his own finger, before interlacing their newly adorned hands together. Gold and black shone in perfect harmony with one another.

Then she cupped his face with both hands and kissed him.

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The crimson hues of sunrise had just begun to colour the sky by the time they slipped onto the balcony, away from the still ongoing festivities. The faint sound of music and laughter could still be heard from inside the palace even at this hour. Alina hummed peacefully as Aleksander stepped close behind her, pulling her against his chest with strong arms. The rising sun was not yet visible over the spires of Os Alta, but neither of them were in a rush to move. Both of them content to wait for the first rays to crest over the horizon.

Aleksander pressed a tender kiss to the top of her head, where in a few days a crown would sit. The coronation would be a celebration for the people and the nation. A new dawn for Ravka, as Aleksander had declared in Novokribirsk. But they had both decided that they wanted their wedding to be a more intimate occasion.

The ceremony was a beautiful thing. Flowers filled the entirety of the Little Palace. Delicate blue irises that she favoured as well as roses, lilies and wildflowers. She would have been happy with a quiet affair with only the two of them, but she would not complain about the presence of so many of her friends, her family, by her side as she pledged herself to Aleksander for eternity.

Growing up, Alina had never had much family. She had thought she had been content with that. A small family. A small life. But then Aleksander had taken her hand all those months



ago, and with him by her side she finally realised that her life could be something other than small.

There was still work to be done of course. Ravka's problems would not disappear overnight, and she knew neither of them would fully rest until the entire world was safe for Grisha. But standing here now, wrapped in the arms of the man she loved, she allowed herself to forget all of that and just *feel*.

"What do you suppose tomorrow will bring," she said as they watched the first light of dawn begin to illuminate the sky.

Gently, he spun her round in his arms so their faces were only a hair's breadth apart. The sight of him so close to her was as familiar as breathing, but her breath still caught in anticipation as he leaned down to kiss her. His lips were soft, and as always she felt the sensation of warmth and comfort wash over her at his touch. She knew that in all the time they would have together, she would never tire of the rush that she felt whenever they kissed.

He pulled away slightly, letting their foreheads touch as he smiled down at her. When he spoke, his words were joyous in their sincerity.

"I'm not sure," he said, "but as long as you're by my side, then I can't wait to find out."

## Chapter End Notes

I can't quite believe that it's finally over!

Back when I first started this fic, it was just a oneshot that I thought I'd post and then move on from writing fanfiction. Instead I received an incredible amount of support which convinced me to develop this further into the story we have just finished. I'm now completely engrossed in writing with several more projects underway which I can't wait to share with you all.

Thank you so much to everyone who has read this story. Your love and support has meant the world to me, and I truly could not have finished this without you all.

## End Notes

Thank you so much for reading! Initially this was just going to be a oneshot, but all of your lovely feedback has inspired me to turn this into something longer.

Comments are very much appreciated :)

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!